

## The Myth of Strasserite Socialism

When the possibility of alternatives to Hitler is discussed in alternate history discussion circles, inevitably the Strasser brothers are mentioned. However, in many cases the discussion is ill-informed due to the persistence of stereotypes and myths. The most persistent myth about Gregor and Otto Strasser is that they were radicals who took the ‘socialist’ aspects of National Socialism seriously, which is why Gregor was assassinated by the SS during the so-called Night of the Long Knives on 30 June 1934. Usually, they and their supporters are equated with the often-misunderstood agenda of Ernst Röhm and those SA street fighters who clamoured for a poorly defined “Second Revolution”. Here it is forgotten that Röhm, while opposed to the old elites, demanded the primacy of the soldier. As such he rejected the supremacy of the Party’s political leadership over the stormtroopers. He idealised the camaraderie of the trenches, and believed leadership should be vested in a new warrior elite that had proved its mettle in the “storm of steel”, not in politicians.<sup>1</sup> The SA would acquire broad powers over the civil administration, and police and simultaneously absorb the Reichswehr.<sup>2</sup> His vision of the new Germany was that of a hyper-militarised nation that would sweep away bourgeois society and the old political, business and military elites. In place of the traditional army, there would be a national people’s militia, which would form the core of the martial state.<sup>3</sup> This sounds more like a far-right, elitist, anti-capitalist stratocracy than “brown Bolshevism”. At the time of Gregor Strasser’s resignation, his opinion of Röhm was very poor. Indeed, he called the SA chief of staff a “pervert”.<sup>4</sup>

Oftentimes, the beliefs of Otto Strasser are projected onto his more successful Gregor. This ignores the fact that Otto left the Nazi Party in 1930 and led an irrelevant splinter group, whereas Gregor remained a highly influential Party functionary until he resigned in November 1932. By then Gregor had risen to become the second most powerful man in the Nazi Party. It was he who turned the disorganised Nazi movement into a sophisticated party machine, with a powerful electoral and propaganda apparatus. Indeed, his organisational skills were crucial for the transformation of the Nazi Party from one of many far-right splinter groups that operated on the fringes of south German politics into a mass movement with nationwide appeal that transcended class lines. The anti-capitalist rhetoric he employed during the 1920s is often cited as evidence of his socialist convictions, but careful examinations of his speeches and the Bamberg programme reveals that his ‘socialism’ remained vague and ill-defined. It boiled down to hatred of ‘materialism’, which he equated with capitalism and Marxism, and nostalgia for medieval craftsmen guilds. Gregor called Marxism Jewish and accused it of having a materialistic outlook that was anathema to National Socialism. To him, socialism meant command and obedience, not class struggle, and the overturning of ‘natural’ hierarchy. It was the subordination of the individual to the greater whole, along the lines of Oswald Spengler’s ‘Prussian Socialism’. Indeed, Gregor unsuccessfully tried to recruit Spengler in 1925.<sup>5</sup> His

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<sup>1</sup> Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler: 1889 – 1936* (Munich, 2002), p. 221-222.

<sup>2</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 633-635.

<sup>3</sup> Steinback, Athahn (2019), *Thinking Beyond The Führer: The Ideological and Structural Evolution of National Socialism, 1919-1934*, Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations. 949, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/949>, access on 27.08.2023, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Steinback, *Thinking Beyond The Führer*, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> Strachura, Peter D., *Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism* (Abingdon, 2015 (1983), p. 43-44. Spengler defined Prussian socialism in collectivist, but at the same time conservative terms: all must serve the greater whole and the king is the first

belief in hierarchy and merit is unsurprising when one considers that Gregor served as an officer in the First World War and been decorated with the Iron Cross. As Reichsorganisationsleiter (Reich Organisation Leader – essentially the Nazi Party’s equivalent to a General Secretary), Gregor had centralised the party bureaucracy under his him and actively prepared it for the day when it would take the helm of the ship of state. Hitler’s complete lack of interest in organisational affairs and Gregor’s administrative aptitude made the latter the Party’s de facto general secretary. The Reichsorganisationsleitung (ROL) was centralised around his person, and he devoted himself to creating a sophisticated network of inspectors that would ensure the Gauleiters acted in accordance with directives from the Party centre. Ironically, Gregor’s plans for Germany’s economic recovery from 1932 heavily influenced the Reinhardt programme of work creation and infrastructure development that was enacted in 1933, since the Party leadership had not devised any new plans after his downfall. Far from being the leader of a radical fringe detested by industrialists and Junkers for his ‘hardline socialist agenda’, at the time of his resignation he was seen as more constructive and cooperative than Hitler. By the 1930s, he had close ties to German industrialists and even received donations from big business. Strasser was racist and more than willing to resort to violence. His economic and social ideas were vague, contradictory, and eclectic, but not entirely incompatible with Hitler’s. In foreign policy he was less ambitious and seems to have lacked Hitler’s fixation on eastern living space, but nonetheless revanchist and imperialist. The root cause of his downfall was a difference in tactics and personality, not ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Following the failure of his candidacy as Reich President, Hitler was offered the post of Vice-Chancellor by Reich Chancellor Franz von Papen. True to his all or nothing strategy, Hitler refused, for he would settle for nothing less than the chancellorship Gregor was adamant that the Nazi party had to be ready to enter a coalition government as a junior partner if need be. Both believed the Nazi Party needed to seize power, but Strasser wanted to take it by stealth, fearing that the constant campaigning and lack of progress was exhausting the Party faithful. Popular support was waning. Frustrated by the National Socialist movement’s lack of progress, the streetfighters of the SA called for an abandonment of the policy of legality and the pursuit of violent revolution. Moreover, the Nazi Party was running out of money. Something had to be done to break the deadlock. Of the two, Hitler was the millenarian prophet who believed such a compromise would dilute and corrupt his ‘sacred mission’, Gregor Strasser was the adaptable political operator. He was, in short, a politician who had no qualms about dropping what had once been strongly held convictions.

Things came to a head when the Nazi Party lost votes in the November 1932 Reichstag election. The new chancellor General Kurt von Schleicher, an anti-democratic militarist, hoped to enlist Strasser and his followers to secure his government. In contrast to Hitler, who had never concealed his contempt for trade unions, Gregor Strasser had adopted a conciliatory stance

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servant of the state. Every citizen would be assigned a position and obediently fulfil their duties. He considered King Frederick Wilhelm I of Prussia to have been the first German socialist, and idealised Frederick the Great. Significantly, Spengler rejected both democracy and class struggle, arguing that “true socialism” would manifest in the form of a corporatist organisation of society based on command and obedience. See Spengler, Oswald, *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Munich, 1920), p. 15, 29 and 60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 494. For example, Gregor Strasser received donations from Paul Silverberg, a major industrialist who hoped to persuade the Nazis to adopt more business-friendly policies. See Schulz, Gerhard, *Von Brüning zu Hitler. Der Wandel des politischen Systems in Deutschland 1930 – 1933* (Berlin, 1992), p. 1043.

towards them. Thus, it was hoped that his ties to trade union leaders and his own following in the Nazi Party would provide Schleicher's government with sufficient grassroots support. This would also enable the Schleicher cabinet to carry out a comprehensive work creation programme, which was also in line with Gregor's own economic recovery programme. By autumn 1932 Hitler and Gregor Strasser were at loggerheads. Hitler had dissolved the economic policy department, led by Strasser's ally Otto Wagener, and prohibited the dissemination of the economic recovery programme. He also condemned Strasser's trade union-friendly speech to the Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation (NSBO, National Socialist Factory Organisation – a Nazi labour union and the predecessor of the German Labour Front). In September 1932, Hitler rejected Strasser's assertion that the Nazi Party should support Schleicher's government. By now Strasser was the only senior Nazi leader who believed that the Party could not wait until Hitler had become Reich chancellor.<sup>7</sup>

Secretly, Schleicher hoped to split the Nazi Party, and in the process create an authoritarian government with labour unions, the Strasserite wing, and the army as its bedrock. He was confident that 60 Nazi members of the Reichstag would follow Strasser, and that he would be able to get the support of the Social Democrats and the bourgeois parties to implement a package of economic reforms and work creation programmes.<sup>8</sup> On 3 December 1932, Schleicher offered Strasser the position of Vice-Chancellor. However, there is no evidence that Gregor Strasser wanted to challenge Hitler and split the Nazi Party. Instead, he asked Hitler for permission, and predictably the Führer denied it and accused him of treason. Gregor refused Schleicher's offer and resigned from all his party posts. One factor might have been his realisation that an open challenge to Hitler would have only had limited support among the Party faithful. His support was the strongest among the Reichstag delegates, but they did not constitute a cohesive faction. In his letter to Hitler, he asserted that he had never opposed Hitler's political programme, and only criticised his unclear stance regarding the assumption of power. Moreover, he lamented being excluded from the inner circle, and declared that he would not play second fiddle to Göring, Goebbels and Röhm.<sup>9</sup> Hitler assembled the leaders of the Party, and formally assumed the vacant post of Reichsorganisationsleiter. Given Hitler's well-known disinterest for administrative matters, this was tantamount to destroying Strasser's well-organised bureaucratic machine. Robert Ley was appointed his Chief of Staff, while the fanatical Hitler admirer Rudolf Hess was put in charge of the newly created Political Central Commission. Strasser's Reich inspections, which had been used to keep tabs on the regional leaders, were dissolved.<sup>10</sup>

It is pertinent to note that this did not lead to a large-scale purge of 'Strasserites'. Indeed, some achieved infamy under the regime. One of the most notorious was Erich Koch, the Gauleiter of East Prussia and future butcher of Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Thus overall, there is no evidence that Gregor was plotting to topple Hitler and replace him as leader. He detested the "Munich clique" and was

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<sup>7</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 494-495.

<sup>8</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 492.

<sup>9</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 495-496.

<sup>10</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 498.499.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1920s and early 1930s, Koch was a follower of Gregor Strasser, who was his political mentor. Gregor's resignation left him dejected. However, he saw no contradiction between being an adherent of "Strasserite" ideals and a loyal follower of Hitler. See Meindl, Ralf, *Ostpreußens Gauleiter. Erich Koch – eine politische Biographie* (Osnabrück, 2007), p. 61-63 and p. 111-123.

not under the spell of Hitler's cult of personality but recognised his importance as a unifying figure.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps he was too much of an institutional loyalist to undermine the Nazi movement he had dedicated his life to. When Otto gave up his Party membership, he proclaimed that the socialists had left the Nazi Party, heaping scorn upon the Munich leadership and criticising for refusing to support the Indian struggle for independence. However, as a closer examination of his book 'Germany Tomorrow' will reveal, he was not a 'National Bolshevik' or a 'beefsteak Nazi'. Instead, his programme boiled down a neo-feudalist reorganisation of society along corporatist lines. Indeed, his anti-urbanism and agrarian romanticism made him actively hostile to the proletariat. If this was socialism, it was a distinctly feudal one.

Much of the idea that the 'Strasserites' represented a 'socialist' alternative to Hitler and the Munich clique centres on the 1926 Bamberg Conference. Hitler had been released from jail in 1925. In his absence the banned Nazi Party had fragmented into numerous splinter groups that actively feuded with each other. This, of course, meant that there was a vacuum Hitler could fill. However, after his release he was still banned from public speaking in Bavaria. He chose Gregor to organise the Party in the north. He was in many ways a natural choice. Gregor was a Bavarian and a pharmacist by profession. During the war Gregor had risen to the rank of Oberleutnant. After Germany's defeat he joined the Freikorps led by Franz Ritter von Epp, which brutally suppressed the Bavarian Soviet Republic. In 1920, he had participated in the failed Kapp Putsch. He became the SA's leader in lower Bavaria, participated in the Beer Hall Putsch and served as Gauleiter of Lower Bavaria. He was both a skilled organiser and capable public speaker. His view of what constituted true "National Socialism" had been shaped by his experiences in the trenches.

Soon a rift developed between the north Germans and the Munich clique. North Germany was far more urbanised and industrialised than Bavaria. Moreover, the Communists had a far stronger presence. Nazi party agitators had to be sensitive to the concerns of the urban proletariat, especially in the industrial heartland in the Ruhr. Thus, the Nazi movement needed to address their concerns to win them over. Gregor needed to look no further than his own brother Otto, who had ironically supported the opposition to the Kapp Putsch before becoming disillusioned by the Social Democrats. It is worth keeping in mind that at the time, German party politics was characterised by sectional cleavages. Electoral preferences were, to a large extent, determined by one's social-economic status and Christian denomination. The Social Democrats and the Communists monopolised the vote of the urban proletariat, at least outside of Catholic constituencies, while the DNVP, the DDP and the DVP catered to the various sections of the bourgeoisie. The only parties that managed to transcend class were the Centre Party and the BVP, its Bavarian sister, as they appealed to Catholics. The Nazi Party aspired to unite all those it considered racially pure Germans. This was indicated in its very name, through which it claimed to stand for both nationalism and socialism. From a marketing standpoint this was canny, but it also created a dilemma.<sup>13</sup> The potential for friction was high. The northern Germans' more populist approach that at least paid lip service to the concerns of the urban proletariat was a response to this. As the man on the spot, Gregor was the senior Nazi leader confronted with the bread-and-butter issues of a new political movement trying to win over new

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<sup>12</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 350.

<sup>13</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 40.

constituents in an unfamiliar region. Hitler, meanwhile, remained in distant Munich, and was thus fairly detached from the situation.<sup>14</sup> One must also consider the question of religion. Bavaria was overwhelmingly Catholic, but north Germany was mostly Protestant. Personal rivalries also played a role. The Nazi Party had fractured after the failed coup. Streicher, Amann and Esser had led the Großdeutsche Volksgemeinschaft, which clashed with the Nationalsozialistische Freiheitsbewegung, of which Gregor had been one of the leaders. The fact that the Munich “troika” had been able to regain positions of influence in the Nazi Party headquarters rankled the northern Germans. Hitler’s passivity and disinterest in organisational matters only intensified the rivalry.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the ‘north Germans’ considered the ‘immutable’ Twenty-Five Point Programme to be vague and half-baked. Both Strassers had academic degrees, as did Goebbels, who at the time was their supporter and one of the Party’s agitators in the Ruhr. They could not help being unimpressed by the programme, as well as the sycophantic clique Hitler surrounded himself with in Munich. To them, men like Julius Streicher, Hermann Esser and Alfred Rosenberg were incapable ignoramuses and sycophants at best. However, to Hitler this represented an assault on the Führerprinzip, and thus his position as the absolute, providential leader of the movement. Gregor sought to rationalise the Party in both organisational and ideological terms to turn it into a formidable machine. To that end he gathered northern German Nazi agitators and ideologues in Eberfeld. There is no evidence that this represented an attempt to unseat Hitler himself, though it was clearly directed against the Munich clique he surrounded himself with. He also sought to build up a publishing machine for the northern German wing, enabling it to disseminate its tenets. Not only would this allow the party to broaden its public appeal, but it would also create a party press independent of Munich. To that end, Gregor recruited the young firebrand Goebbels. Tension between the northerners and the southerners was heightened by Hitler’s disinterest in organisational matters and apparent lack of appreciation for the situation the northerners found themselves in, as well as resentment of Streicher, Esser and their apparent influence.<sup>16</sup>

In September 1925, the so-called Working Community Northwest came into being. Composed of northern and western Gauleiters, it pursued the goal of replacing the half-baked Twenty-Five-Point Programme. At the same time the northerners published the bi-monthly NS-Briefe to disseminate their ideas.<sup>17</sup> All of the northern German leaders accepted Hitler’s position as leader of the movement. They did not view themselves as rebels, but as loyalists who wanted to free him from the pernicious influence of the likes of Esser and Streicher. However, they believed that even the Führer was bound by the Party’s programme. In effect, they wanted to create a National Socialist canon.<sup>18</sup> The working group presented a draft programme in November 1925. Here it is pertinent to note that the process was characterised by intense debate and rivalries between the Nazi leaders. As such it must be assumed that the proposal represented a compromise. It was not a conscious challenge to Hitler’s authority, though Goebbels did criticise his leadership at the time. However, the fact that a group of Party oligarchs had taken

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<sup>14</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 351.

<sup>16</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 45

<sup>18</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 351.

the liberty of overhauling the Party dogma without his sanction would have inevitably undermined his personalist style of leadership. At the same time, the Working Community voted to support the KPD led referendum for the expropriation of the princely estates.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways the Eberfeld programme expanded upon the Twenty-Five Points, which had already envisaged an authoritarian Reich and contained vague corporatist, anti-capitalist elements. This should not come as a surprise since the Twenty-Five Points had been drafted by Gottfried Feder, who fancied himself a Nazi economist.<sup>20</sup> In theory, the Twenty-Five Points demanded profit-sharing, the nationalisation of trusts, the abolition of unearned income and the ‘breaking of debt (interest) slavery’ (“Brechung der Zinsknechtschaft”). They had also envisaged a corporatist organisation of the economy, but not provided any details.<sup>21</sup>

The Eberfeld programme made concrete proposals for a reorganisation of the German government and the economy. The programme blended authoritarian nationalism, guild corporatism and a distinctly petty-bourgeois socialism. Private property was supposed to be retained, but the state would exercise overall control over the means of production.<sup>22</sup> Doubtless the ordoliberal economist Walter Eucken would have called it a centrally planned economy with private property.<sup>23</sup> This is in keeping with many ideological currents that sought a third way between the two extremes of unfettered capitalism and a Soviet-style centrally planned economy. Unsurprisingly, the programme stood in opposition to free trade, which was perceived as a threat to German nationhood. Local, state and Reich level Chambers of Estates would oversee economic activity. Composed of representatives of the various economic sectors, these chambers would function as regulatory and administrative bodies.<sup>24</sup> The similarities to the corporatist aspirations of the Italian Fascists, the Austrian Fatherland Front and the Spanish Falangists, but also of the 20 July plotters, are unmistakable. Moreover, the chambers would advise the government on economic matters and investigate complaints. One is reminded of the role guilds played during the medieval and early modern era.

Although private property rights were supposed to be retained, businesses were supposed to be transformed into joint stock corporations if they had more than twenty employees. Moreover, the state would obtain control of 51% of the shares in essential industries such as armaments, banks, chemical, and electrical firms. Here it is pertinent to note that the German electricity market was already characterised by a system of vertically integrated utilities with regional monopolies. Moreover, the German state was also active as an entrepreneur in this market.<sup>25</sup> The German state’s share in non-essential industries was supposed to be 49%. However, the

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<sup>19</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 353.

<sup>20</sup> Janssen, Hauke, *Nationalökonomie und Nationalsozialismus. Die deutsche Volkswirtschaftslehre in den dreißiger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg, 2012,) p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> documentArchiv (2004), *25-Punkte-Programm der Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Arbeiterpartei* (1920), <http://www.documentarchiv.de/wr/1920/nsdap-programm.html>, access on 26.08.2023.

<sup>22</sup> Kühnl, Reinhard, ‘Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken: Das Strasser-Programm von 1925/26’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* vol. 14 (1966), No. 3, p. 327.

<sup>23</sup> Eucken, Walter, *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik* (Tübingen, 7th edition, 2004), p. 60. In his book, Eucken also criticises a corporatist organisation of the economy. According to him, the corporatist associations would either evolve into monopolistic, interest groups that only seek to expand their own power or become tools of state planning authorities. The corporations would only pursue the interest of their members and thus lack incentive to preserve an economic system based on free competition. See Eucken, *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik*, p. 145-146.

<sup>24</sup> Kühnl, ‘Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken’, p. 329-330.

<sup>25</sup> Krisp, Annika (2007), *Der Deutsche Strommarkt in Europa - Zwischen Wettbewerb und Klimaschutz*, <https://d-nb.info/987032356/34>, access on 26.03.2023, p. 18 –24.

document proceeds to further split up the German state's shares in the following fashion: in the case of essential-industries, 30% would belong directly to the Reich, 10% to the workforce, 6% to the region and 5% to the municipality. In the case of non-essential industries, the Reich's and the workforce's shares remained the same, but those of the region dropped to 5% and those of the municipality to 4%. This distribution was supposed to be reflected in the supervisory board. The Reich's representative would be either its chairman or its deputy chairman.<sup>26</sup>

Within a joint stock corporation, employees would be grouped into labour unions with a 10% share of the company. Of course, this would still be dwarfed by the employers' share<sup>27</sup>. To be sure, it theoretically gave the workers a seat at the table, but ironically falls short of what they have obtained in today's Federal Republic of Germany. And surely no one, except American conservatives, would call modern-day Germany 'socialist' or 'communist'. The pitiful state of the Linke is proof enough, as is the fact that a man like Gerhard Schröder, friend to big business and to a far right, kleptocratic dictator, could serve as chancellor for many years. Regardless, it remains unclear whose interests the manager is supposed to represent. Since the Reich would, for example, be a major shareholder in every automobile company, there can be no real competition, at least wherever the state owns most of the shares. In practical terms, this system would have created a monopolistic oligarchy since the state would have been involved in every enterprise.

The Eberfeld programme also demanded that large agricultural estates be broken up. This is not surprising since north Germans supported the expropriation of former princely estates. However, the German state was supposed to grant legal and financial protection to hereditary smallholders.<sup>28</sup> The agrarian reform proposals also show the petty-bourgeois character of Eberfeld "socialism". Although holdings larger than 1000 Morgen were to be broken up, agricultural labourers who had worked on the property and were of German nationality would only receive land with 2 Morgen, whereas the other farmers could own holdings as big as 50 to 200 Morgen. Moreover, hereditary holdings up to a size of 1000 Morgen would remain untouched as long there was a male heir.<sup>29</sup> Here we see the strand of agrarian romanticism that was so common among German conservatives and the far right. Even in 1932, after he had abandoned much of his hardline rhetoric, Gregor remained a proponent of economic autarky, agrarian and industrial protectionism, though his ideas remained half-baked and ill-defined.<sup>30</sup>

The Reich Chamber of Estates would share legislative authority with a National Council. Its 100 representatives would be drawn evenly from the five occupational chambers (agricultural chamber, chamber of industry and commerce, workers' chamber, chamber of civil servants and employees, and chamber of free professions). In addition, the Chamber would include ten notables appointed directly by the Reichspräsident.<sup>31</sup> The fact that each occupational chamber would send the same number of representatives is important, because it means the actual numerical strength and economic importance of each profession would be ignored. For

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<sup>26</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 328.

<sup>27</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 328.

<sup>28</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 327.

<sup>29</sup> The appointed members were intended to be representatives of the universities and the Christian churches as well as distinguished notables. See Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 327.

<sup>30</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 325.

example, the industrial working class comprised about half of the population but would still get the same number of representatives as the free professions, to whom only a small number of the German people belonged. The representatives of the agricultural chamber, the chamber of industry and commerce, the chamber of civil servants and employees and the chamber of free professions would mostly or entirely be representatives of the middle class. In other words, the workers would be heavily outnumbered by the *Mittelstand* (middle class), who could constitute about 70% of the Reich Chamber's delegates. Thus, votes would not only be counted, but weighed based on social strata.<sup>32</sup> Economic and thus political power would be redistributed, but not for the benefit of the workers but the middle classes. No occupational chamber was to be allowed to provide more than half of the members of a chamber of estates. This reflects middle class anxieties about being marginalised by the industrial proletariat. In contrast to the historical guild system of the Middle Ages, the elected representatives were not supposed to possess an imperative mandate or be recallable by his electors.<sup>33</sup>

As for agriculture, land and soil were defined as property of the nations. Assets, which included buildings, would be private property. Farmers would be required to join compulsory cooperatives. These cooperatives would be combined into district associations and operate under the oversight of the chamber of agriculture. Hereditary holdings could neither be sold or borrowed against. State domains could not be divided and were intended to be turned into model farms managed by administrators controlled by the regional chambers. The small new holdings could only be leased as entails on behalf of the Reich.<sup>34</sup> The free sale of produce would be prohibited. Instead, farmers could only sell to the cooperative. Likewise, members of the finishing trades such as butchers and bakers would also be required to join guilds with compulsory membership. The producers' cooperatives and guilds or large consumers' cooperatives would enter direct delivery contracts, which would be authorised by state authorities within the municipality, district, or region. In the case of disagreement, the matter would be referred to the district or regional chamber of estates.<sup>35</sup>

Reflecting a traditional German affinity for cartels, the Reich Ministry of Economics was charged with combining similar enterprises into cartels. At the same time, the Ministry of Economics was empowered to close unprofitable enterprises.<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding the populist rhetoric used by the Strasser brothers and their acolytes, the proposed system discriminated against the proletariat and deliberately favoured small and medium businessowners. However, it also reduced the latter's freedom of action and made membership in guilds or agricultural cooperatives mandatory. Far from being a deviation from the precepts of the right, the Eberfeld programme represented yet another third wayist attempt to "resolve" class struggle by forcing the productive forces of a nation such as workers, businessmen, farmers, and artisans to work together for the benefit of the state, under government oversight. The idea of class collaboration is antithetical to Marxism, which consider class struggle to be the mover of history.

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<sup>32</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 329-330.

<sup>33</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 330.

<sup>34</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 327.

<sup>35</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 331.

<sup>36</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 331.

Here it is worth recalling Karl Marx' scathing remarks about 'feudal' and 'petti-bourgeois socialism' in the Communist Manifesto. He characterised the feudal aristocracy, the medieval burghesses and small peasant proprietors as classes that had been displaced by the modern bourgeoisie. In his view, the feudalists and the petti-bourgeoisie appropriated 'socialist' rhetoric to win over the working class against their foe, only to chain them when they were no longer needed. 'Petti-bourgeois socialism' would either restore the old means of production and exchange or try to awkwardly combine modern means of production with the old property relations via the restoration of corporative guilds in manufacturing and of patriarchal structures in agriculture. It should not be forgotten that Marx characterises the peasantry as a regressive force.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding the flaws of Marxist analysis and the questionable analytical value of the concept of 'feudal socialism', one cannot help but see the similarities to the Eberfeld programme. The programme represents a yearning for a 'simpler, more harmonious time' in a pre-industrial age.

The fact that, in the final analysis, the true winner would be the government bureaucrat probably reflects the fact that one cannot build a state based on smallholders and guilds, yet at the same time build an empire that was supposed to dominate the European continent and rule a colonial empire. Small businesses could not manufacture the armaments and munitions the Reichswehr would need to crush those who stood in the way of the Greater German Reich achieving its imperialist ambitions. Given Gregor's well-known flexibility, there is no reason to assume that a hypothetical Reich Chancellor Gregor Strasser would've been a dogmatist though. At the end of the day, the revanchist, imperialist ambitions of Eberfeld would've dictated war as much as Hitler's vision of lebensraum. Though less virulent than Munich, the Eberfeld programme was staunchly anti-Semitic. Jews were barred from citizenship. In the case of mixed ancestry, the heritage of the father would determine whether an individual was eligible for citizenship. The press would be subjected to a high degree of state control, and private newspapers would only remain in existence if they were completely owned and edited by German citizens. No doubt this reflects Nazi conspiracy theories about the non-Nazi press being controlled by "Jewish plutocrats" and "Communists".<sup>38</sup>

As has been mentioned, the Eberfeld programme sought to give occupational associations a role in governance through regional and Reich level Chambers of Estates. The Reichspräsident was intended to be elected by the National Council and the Reich Chamber of Estates. The National Council can be considered analogous to an upper house and would be composed of the twelve to fourteen state presidents (appointed by the Reich President), the five chairmen of the occupational chambers of the Reich Chamber of Estates, and the Reichspräsident himself. The head of state would serve a seven-year-term and appoint the Reich chancellor and the other members of the cabinet, who would be responsible for day-to-day governance. The document says the first president would possess dictatorial powers, though these remain unspecified.<sup>39</sup>

In the sphere of foreign policy, the programme was distinctly revanchist, though less ambitious than the lebensraum fantasies pursued by Hitler. It demanded the restoration of the Kaiserreich's

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich (2010 [1848]): *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, published on <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>, access on 26.08.2023, p. 28-29.

<sup>38</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 331-332.

<sup>39</sup> Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 325.

pre-war borders, as well as a colonial empire in central Africa. The latter point is interesting since Hitler expressed disinterest in overseas colonies in 'Mein Kampf', deeming them as unsuitable for the kind of settler colonialism he aimed to undertake in eastern Europe. At the same time, the authors of the programme demanded the foundation of a German-dominated United States of Europe. The new German Reich would restore the borders of 1914 and unite all 'ethnic Germans' ('Volksdeutsche') within its borders. According to the programme, this would entail the annexation of Austria, South Tyrol, and the Sudetenland. It is worth pointing out that the borders of 1914 would have also included territories inhabited by non-German populations, namely Poles and French. The fact that the programme demanded the annexation of South Tyrol was obviously at loggerheads with Hitler's dream of an alliance with Fascist Italy.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the new Germany was supposed to enter an alliance with the Soviet Union. Proponents of the thesis that the Strassers represented a 'National Bolshevik' alternative are quick to cite the idea of a partnership with the Soviet Union against the capitalist powers. But the idea that Germany should align itself with the Soviets to overturn the new order established at Versailles (and in the process subjugate Poland) was also advocated by none other than the staunchly monarchist General Hans von Seeckt.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, while the north German Nazis were duelling the Munich clique, the Reichswehr was secretly cooperating with the Red Army to undermine the Versailles Treaty's ban on rearmament.

Gregor adopted a populist approach by attacking the Weimar Republic as corrupt and accusing the SPD of having betrayed the German workers and sold their future to Western capitalists. He branded the Dawes Plan as Germany's second Versailles and the Locarno Pact as its third. He believed Germany and the Soviet Union shared a common interest in overturning the post-war order. To him both constituted 'oppressed nations', an interesting notion given his openly imperialist ambitions. However, he emphasised that for him as a National Socialist the struggle against Marxism was a sacred task, and that the Nazis felt no sympathy for the 'Jewish leadership' of the Soviet Union. There was an unmistakable gulf between his more conventional views and Hitler's obsession with waging a war of racial annihilation against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' and conquering lebensraum.<sup>42</sup> But Strasser's stance was far from a fringe position at the time. Ironically, in 'Mein Kampf' Hitler himself acknowledged that his fervent hatred of the Soviet Union was not shared by most of the German right. He complained that even völkisch circles "raved" about an alliance with Russia. If this had been an isolated opinion, he would not have surely seen the need to educate his readers about its apparent foolishness.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from trying to introduce a new party programme, the working community also declared its support for the Communist led plebiscite to expropriate the estates of Germany's deposed princes without compensation. Simultaneously, it demanded that Gregor be given a senior post in the Party headquarters and Franz Pfeffer von Salomon be appointed as commander of the SA. The Working Community had neither sent the draft programme to Hitler nor to Gottfried Feder, who considered himself the father of the Twenty-Five Point Programme.<sup>44</sup> On 14

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<sup>40</sup> The central African was supposed to include all former German colonies, Belgian Congo and Portugal's colonies as well as some unspecified French colonies. See Kühnl, 'Zur Programmatik der nationalsozialistischen Linken', p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> Leitz, Christian, *Nazi Foreign Policy, 1933-1941. The Road to Global War* (London, 2004), p. 62-63.

<sup>42</sup> Strachura, Gregor Strasser, p. 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> Tuathail, Geraóid Ó/Dalby, Simon/Routledge, Paul (ed.), *The Geopolitics Reader* (London/New York, 1998), p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 353.

February 1926, Hitler convened the Bamberg conference to put an end to internal dissent. The Strasser brothers and the North German Gauleiters failed to get their way at Bamberg. In classical Hitler fashion, there was no debate. Instead, the conference consisted of a lengthy monologue on the part of the Führer. Hitler mainly talked about foreign policy. He rejected the idea of an alliance with Russia, arguing it would lead to Germany's "bolshevisation". Germany could only achieve greatness through the conquest of living space, which would inevitably be at Russia's expense. Furthermore, he rejected expropriations of princely estates, equating it to class struggle and calling it Jewish.<sup>45</sup> Hitler declared the Twenty-Five Points to be inviolable. In his words, the programme was the foundation of their religion and of their ideology. He proclaimed the slightest deviation would constitute a betrayal of the those had given their lives for the National Socialist idea. This was no doubt a reference to, among others, the "martyrs" of the Beer Hall Putsch. The northern leaders were stunned by this display. They had come here in the expectation that Hitler had called the conference because he had freed himself from the "malign influence" of Esser and Streicher. This showed they had comprehensively misunderstood him. They now faced the dilemma of rejecting the Führer and thus the National Socialist movement or accepting his apotheosis. Cannily, Hitler had linked rejection of his leadership to rejection of the movement's "martyrs". This was a step none of the northerners was willing to make.<sup>46</sup>

However, Hitler did not expel or otherwise punish the northern German "renegades". Through his person, he could unite both conflicting strands of National Socialism. Effectively, the conference did not enshrine a programme, but the Führerprinzip. At the end of the conference, Strasser proclaimed his loyalty to Hitler, who put his arm around him. Future working communities were prohibited in the Party. The Nazi Party would not be guided by programmes formulated through debate among the Party ideologues, but the Führer's will. In the aftermath, Hitler made conciliatory gestures. He allowed Gregor to establish a new publishing house outside of Munich's control. In addition, he permitted the creation of an enlarged Ruhr Gau jointly led by Gregor Strasser's allies Karl Kaufmann, Franz Pfeffer von Salomon and Goebbels. Moreover, he fired the unpopular Esser as propaganda chief and gave his job to Gregor. When Gregor was injured in a car accident, Hitler visited him personally. At the same time, Hitler succeeded in winning over Goebbels, astutely playing on the young agitator's vanity and craving for approval. In late August 1926 he offered Goebbels the post of Gauleiter of Berlin-Brandenburg. Goebbels evolved from a critic to one of Hitler's most fervent acolytes – and an implacable enemy of the Strasser brothers. To placate Strasser, Hitler appointed Franz Pfeffer von Salomon as the chief of the Sturmabteilung (SA), fulfilling a demand of the Eberfeld group.<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that in his speech Hitler barely touched upon the Eberfeld programme outside of foreign policy. It is doubtful that he really read it. This is not surprising because economic questions were of secondary importance to Hitler. To him economic problems were

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<sup>45</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 353-354. The Ruhr triumvirate soon descended into bickering, which was only resolved by Hitler's intervention. In November 1926, he made Kaufmann sole Gauleiter and Pfeffer supreme commander of the SA, while Goebbels was sent to Berlin. By then Goebbels had radically turned against his erstwhile Strasserite allies. See Meindl, *Ostpreußens Gauleiter*, p. 64-65.

<sup>46</sup> Orlow, Dietrich, *The Nazi Party 1919 -1945. A Complete History* (New York, 2010.), p. 49-50.

<sup>47</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 355-356.

just a question of will.<sup>48</sup> Germany would guarantee its prosperity through the conquest of eastern living space. As a firm believer in the primacy of politics, he believed the economy was just a means to implement the objectives of the state.<sup>49</sup> His economic views were dictated by his crude Social Darwinist beliefs. To him the survival of the nation was determined by violent racial struggle, hence the economy had to be subservient to national interests. For this reason, the liberal belief in free trade had to be abandoned. Hitler himself was not a socialist, and upheld private property, private enterprise, and competition. However, in his worldview the economic development of the nation should not be dictated by market forces, but by the interests of the state. Businessmen could get a seat at the table and profit handsomely, but they had to support the regime's goals. Hitler rejected the old notions of class and privilege that were promoted by the aristocracy, but also the equality of man. He cared about race, not class. Every policy pushed by him served the goal of facilitating a war of conquest. The German people would achieve economic prosperity and a higher standard of living by building its fortunes on the backs of foreign people, who had been subjugated and enslaved.<sup>50</sup>

He distinguished between what he called “productive capitalism” (*schaffendes Kapital*), which he equated with industrial capitalism, and “money-grubbing capitalism” (*raffendes Kapital*), which in his view was embodied by finance capitalism. While industrial capital created economic value through labour and served the nation, finance capitalism was under the control of Jewish conspirators and had a pernicious effect on the national economy<sup>51</sup>. Nazi ideology opposed the abolition of private property. Its understanding of “socialism” was based on the ideal of a *Volksgemeinschaft* (“National Community”) that would unite all racially pure Germans across all divisions of class, region, and Christian denomination. This harmonious society would be free of class conflict but organised based on racial biology. Those deemed racially inferior, such as Jews, the mentally and physically disabled, would be excluded from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, persecuted, and exterminated.<sup>52</sup> Hitler did not reject foreign trade but viewed it as a zero-sum game. He saw the economic power of the United States as proof that industrial mass production and prosperity required the ruthless conquest of living space. To him the liberal belief in progress through free trade was Jewish propaganda and would inevitably lead to violent competition for foreign markets. The only winners would be the “Jewish conspirators”, whom he blamed for Germany's misfortune.<sup>53</sup> As such the finer points of corporatism or constitutional reorganisation were not relevant. Strasser and his acolytes had overstepped their boundaries because they appeared to criticise the central pillars of his ideology, namely alliance with Britain and Italy and a racial war to conquer living space and destroy “Judeo-Bolshevism”. Moreover, by taking it into their own hands to draft a new programme, they had questioned the *Führerprinzip*.

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<sup>48</sup> For example, when Hitler was told that work creation programmes would cause inflation, he replied that inflation was just lack of discipline. See. Janssen, Hauke, *Nationalökonomie und Nationalsozialismus*, p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> Herbst, Ludolf, *Der Totale Krieg und die Ordnung der Wirtschaft. Die Kriegswirtschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik, Ideologie und Propaganda 1939-1945* (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 52-54.

<sup>50</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 568-569.

<sup>51</sup> Wildt, Michael, ‘Der Begriff der Arbeit bei Hitler’, Buggeln, Marc/Wildt, Michael, *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 2019), p. 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> Janssen, *Nationalökonomie und Nationalsozialismus*, p. 125.

<sup>53</sup> See Tooze, Adam, *The Wages of Destruction. The Making & Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2007), p. 8-10.

If they avoided these missteps, they were free to remain in the Party, and do almost anything they wanted. Beyond a few core concepts such as virulent anti-Semitism anti-Slavism, ultra-nationalist German imperialism and veneration of Hitler as Germany's messianic leader, National Socialist orthodoxy remained a fluid, deliberately vague thing. Thus, the Party could accommodate characters as diverse as Himmler, Göring, Streicher, Goebbels, Speer, Bormann, and Rosenberg because all of them were obedient to Hitler. That was, in many ways, its strength. All were free to pursue their respective hobby horses as long as they did not question Hitler and remained useful. Hence the incorporation of former "Strasserites" and "social revolutionaries" such as Goebbels, Karl Kaufmann and Koch strengthened rather than undermined the Party. What Strasser and his followers failed to realise was that the rift between them and Hitler was not the fault of his entourage. Hitler had not been turned against them by the likes of Esser or Streicher, and he didn't care about the finer points of the programme beyond those general tenets that formed the core of his world view. He simply would not accept equals or share power. This failure to understand his way of thinking would play an important role in the Strassers' eventual downfall.

In November 1926, Gregor still expressed his belief that Germany's eastern enemy was Poland, not the Soviet Union, with which the Reich did not share a border. It should be noted that a hostile attitude towards Poland was an article of faith among German conservatives and the far right.<sup>54</sup> However, he soon dropped demand for a Soviet-German alliance and accepted Hitler's idea of an alliance with Britain and Italy.<sup>55</sup> Gregor continued to try to shape the Party's ideological development. However, he studiously avoided deviations from Hitler's line on foreign policy. In 1926, he wrote the pamphlet "Thoughts About the Tasks of the Future". In this document, Gregor outlined his vision of a collectivist society in which an individual's standing would be determined by service to the state. As could be expected, he proclaimed that individuals were fundamentally unequal. This was in keeping with Nazi doctrine, but Gregor sought to distribute power based on state service. Under his model, all citizens would be required to serve the state by joining the labour service for one year. During that time they would be taught a trade. After completing their national service, they would receive the right to vote. However, holding major state offices or joining the civil service would be limited to veterans. Furthermore, veterans would have ten votes, whilst an ordinary citizen would only have one. Military service would be open to volunteers only. This was supposed to guarantee a "selection of the best", effectively creating a martial oligarchy. In Gregor's view, this would ensure that the nation would be led by a racial elite. Furthermore, he reiterated his belief in a form of anti-materialist socialism, organised within a corporatist framework.<sup>56</sup>

His brother Otto refined this concept in "National Socialism and the State", where he promoted the formation of self-governing guilds that would oversee all administrative, cultural, and legal professions. The guilds would manage affairs within their occupational branches and serve as a medium for the training new leaders, thereby rendering political parties obsolete. In Otto's view this would eliminate all "particularistic" tendencies within the Reich, be they economic, religious, political, or regional. He does not elaborate on how he intends to prevent the guilds

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<sup>54</sup> Leitz, *Nazi Foreign Policy*, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Steinback, *Thinking Beyond The Führer*, p. 90-91.

from becoming monopolistic special interest groups. In practical terms, they would be governed by the corporatist state.<sup>57</sup> As a new propaganda chief, Gregor adjusted to the Nazi Party's transformation into a "Führer party", throwing himself into building up a powerful political apparatus that would enable it to take power. Of course, he was also pursuing his agenda. In 1928, he was appointed Reichsorganisationsleiter. He remained even after his regional newspaper in Berlin was shut down in 1930 following an intense feud with Goebbels, and Otto left the Party. His eventual fall from power had a lot to do with a clash of methods and personalities, and little to do with programmatic differences. Following his resignation, Gregor retreated into private life and returned to his former profession as a pharmacist. He became a director in a pharmaceutical subsidiary of IG Farben. Far from intriguing against the regime after Hitler came to power on 30 January 1933, Gregor abstained from politics.

There is no indication that he was in contact with his brother's quixotic Black Front. Interestingly, there are indications that he might have been in the process of reconciling with Hitler before he was murdered by the SS. On 1 February 1934, Gregor was awarded the Golden Party Badge of the Nazi Party. On 13 June 1934, Hitler met Gregor and seems to have offered him the position of Minister of Economics. However, Gregor would only accept if Göring and Goebbels were removed from the cabinet. Hitler was not willing to meet this condition. At the time Goebbels and Göring had been busy shaping the narrative by publishing anti-Strasser polemics.<sup>58</sup> The 30 June purge was an excellent opportunity for Göring, and Himmler to "settle old scores". By Göring's own admission, he took the liberty to expand the 'circle of duties' entrusted to him to eliminate domestic enemies with no connection to the "mutinous" SA leadership. One is reminded of the behaviour of a mafia capo who uses a purge instigated by his Don to violently settle a grudge.

As mentioned, Otto had founded his own party in 1930. His "Kampfgemeinschaft Revolutionärer Nationalsozialisten" (Combat League of Revolutionary National Socialists, more commonly known as the Black Front) remained utterly irrelevant in German politics. Otto had been unpopular in the Nazi Party, and no important Party official followed him. His exit also caused a rupture with Gregor, who distanced himself from his brother and called his agitation against the NSDAP insane. As Kershaw writes, henceforth it was clear that the National Socialist "ideal" and the person of the Führer would be identical.<sup>59</sup> Hitler's rise to power and the Night of the Long Knives forced Otto to go into exile. First, he fled to Austria, then Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and France. In 1940, he fled to Bermuda and finally emigrated to Canada in 1941. However, while Otto criticised Hitler's dictatorship, he still disseminated National Socialist ideology in his writings. For example, his "Fourteen Theses on the German Revolution" characterised Jews as an alien presence. He continued to denounce the Nazi regime in exile, and wrote articles for British, American, and Canadian newspapers. However, politically he remained irrelevant. In 1955, Otto returned to West Germany and founded an unsuccessful neo-Nazi party. In 1940, he published a manifesto called "Germany Tomorrow". In it he outlines his vision of a post-war Germany. The manifesto is worth

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<sup>57</sup> Strasser, Otto, 'National Socialism and the State', Lane, Barbara Miller/Rupp, Leila J. (ed.), *Nazi Ideology before 1933. A Documentation* (Manchester, 1978), p. 102-103.

<sup>58</sup> Strachura, *Gregor Strasser*, p. 123.

<sup>59</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 417.

discussing at some length. Otto defines his ideological vision as distinct from fascism, capitalism, and communism, which he all judges to be totalitarian.<sup>60</sup>

His vision was patriarchal, neo-feudalist, decentralised, and above all contradictory. It is an awkward mixture of petty-bourgeois socialism, pseudo-feudalist, and federalist beliefs. Otto makes a distinction between private property (*Eigentum*), which he rejects, and possession (*Besitz*). Otto defined possession of a thing as usufruct. Based on this definition, an individual was entitled to the use of a thing but does not possess ownership of it. Rather than being allowed to sell to destroy a thing, he made use of it under the supervision of another. The German community was to have sole ownership of the national economy, but in contrast to a command economy the state was not to supposed to run it. Instead, the national economy would be split into different portions and handed over as an “entail” to different individuals and groups. Otto considered this the ideal fusion of general welfare and private initiative.<sup>61</sup> In his manifesto he accused the capitalist system of being responsible for the destructive effects of bureaucratisation and the rise of monopolies, which had led to the “cancer” of proletarianisation, whose “ghastly cultural effects” could not be overcome by establishing a bureaucratic command economy. Here, the manifesto rejects the notion of collectivisation of the peasantry, such as it was practiced in the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup>

Ironically, the supposed socialist is highly anti-proletarian, seeking to deproletarianise the proletariat and establish a utopian, neo-feudal order that will somehow function without hereditary nobles. In that regard, the assumption that he rejected the Nazis’ compromise with the old elites is accurate. However, far from taking over the means of production, the workers are supposed to be “rescued” from the “urban Moloch” Otto so detested by being turned into landed peasants and craftsmen. This must go hand in hand with a policy of deurbanisation. He openly calls for the reagrarisation of Germany.<sup>63</sup> Otto argued that being part of the proletariat is incompatible with independence and that it must be the mission of the regime to find possessions for every German.<sup>64</sup>

The distinction between possession and private property is important because in his manifesto, Otto aimed to restore quasi-medieval property relations. To that end he advocates the apportioning of land and the means of production based on hereditary fiefs. Within the sphere of agriculture, the state will loan land to peasants using local peasant councils. Each farm would be no larger than one tenant can farm unaided, which means production would inevitably be very small-scale. The farmer would be obligated to pay a land tax to the community. This tithe would be payable in kind and replace all other taxes a peasant must pay. Moreover, the programme envisages the expropriation of the great landed estates. Possession of the leased land is meant to be passed down to the peasant’s male offspring after his death, or else be allotted once more if there are no sons.<sup>65</sup> The clauses on inheritance have some overlap with the Nazis’ Hereditary Farm Law of 29 September 1933, though the Nazis left the big

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<sup>60</sup> Strasser, Otto, *Germany Tomorrow*, trans. by Paul and Cedar Paul (London, 1940), p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 145-146.

<sup>62</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 147-148.

<sup>63</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 150-151.

<sup>64</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 147.

<sup>65</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 154-158.

landowners untouched.<sup>66</sup> It is worth pointing out that said law overrode a farmer's freedom to decide over the free distribution of his property, which was unpopular among the peasants. It is doubtful that the Strasserite proposal would have been more popular. One also wonders how a peasant would have been able to invest and manage his finances while being denied access to mortgage credit<sup>67</sup> Regardless, agricultural workers are meant to be transformed into peasants. Otto rejected the argument that large-scale farming is indispensable to ensure a sufficient supply of foodstuffs for the cities. According to the manifesto, the systematic deurbanisation of the cities would solve that problem.<sup>68</sup>

Otto went a step further because he seeks to apply this system of to industrial enterprises. The state, workers and managers were supposed to be partners in each enterprise, forming a factory fellowship. Having been assigned a factory as a fief by the vocational council, the managers will constitute a functional aristocracy.<sup>69</sup> Otto was at pains to stress that somehow this will be distinct from the capitalist class he denounces as exploitative. His managerial class could not purchase shares in any industrial enterprise, only inherit their portion from the state.<sup>70</sup> Decisions within the "factory fellowship" would be jointly made by the state, the managers, and the workers.<sup>71</sup> It remains totally unclear how he intends to ensure that the "functional aristocracy" and, perhaps more importantly, the officials responsible for assigning the fiefs do not abuse their power. As part of the transition, all enterprises would be converted into joint stock companies. However, shares would be inalienable. As they could only be held within the "fief", individuals would be unable to purchase them.<sup>72</sup> Otto compared the formation of a new "estate" of managers to the Prussian officer corps and postulates that the representation of the state in all spheres of economic will bring about "organic joint leadership". In addition, it was viewed as essential to systematically deurbanise industry.<sup>73</sup> To him, this would be a logical consequence of the introduction of autarky and the establishment of the "entail" system in agriculture. He proclaimed these reforms would enable the overthrow of the "dominion of the machine".<sup>74</sup> In Strasser' view, the productivity of German factories was so advanced that industry would be able to produce a sufficiently high output through winter work alone, so that the workers would have the freedom to engage in creative pursuits during summer. The manifesto does not answer the question of whether they would be expected to work in autumn or spring or what Otto considers creative work.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The Reichserbhofgesetz created the Erbhof (hereditary farm), which was insulated from market forces, protected against debt, and passed down from one generation to the next within a "racially pure" peasant family. At the same time, an Erbhof could not be sold or used as a security against mortgages. The owner of an Erbhof was called a "Bauer" (peasant) and had to document his ancestry at least back to the 1800s. Jews, the disabled and the infertile were excluded, and the entire farm was to be inherited by a single male heir. Thus, while the peasants were insulated from competition, their freedom was significantly constrained. It must be observed that while the Nazis did not break up the big estates and the law did not cover marginal peasant holdings, it did not benefit the big landowners either. Agricultural Minister Darré was no friend of the Junkers. The draft law envisaged a programme of collective debt relief, which would have forced all peasants to assume collective responsibility for each other's debts. However, this was shelved. See Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 182-185.

<sup>67</sup> Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 185.

<sup>68</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 158-159.

<sup>69</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 162-164.

<sup>70</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 165.

<sup>71</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 170.

<sup>72</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 166-168.

<sup>73</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 167.

<sup>74</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 151-152.

<sup>75</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 152-153.

It is worth noting that neither Otto nor Gregor were farmers. Their father was a jurist and civil servant. Otto might have been less enthusiastic about returning to a simple peasant life if he had experienced it first-hand. As Tooze assesses, farm life in Germany was characterised by considerable hardship for all but the most privileged farmers. On peasant farms, both men and women had to work extremely long hours, and the work was not just dirty, but often dangerous. Not only was housing substandard, the rate of return per farm unit was very low. Farms smaller than ten hectares were utterly unviable, and only twenty hectares offered the prospect of a decent living. This makes Otto's assertion that peasants could live happy, idyllic lives on tiny farms naïve. Families on tiny farms faced an unenviable life of poverty and overwork, unless the soil or the location was exceptionally good.<sup>76</sup>

Small proprietors, craftsmen and professionals were to be organised into guilds.<sup>77</sup> Otto firmly rejected the idea of a centrally planned economy, which he believed would inhibit his vision of a decentralised, mentally deproletarianised nation based on smallholders and craftsmen. In his words, a planned economy would stifle creativity and destroy the joy of responsibility. He defined his programme as a radical rejection of state socialism, which he viewed as a euphemism for state capitalism. Otto accused fascists and communists alike of glorifying the state and relying on police terror. This is about as far from "National Bolshevism" as can be imagined. He also maintains that the salaries of officials and payments to pensioners could also partly be paid in kind, which is another sign of his agrarian romanticism. One wonders how a tax office official would react if one day a peasant showed up to deliver a load of turnips to pay his taxes. Would part of the tax office employees' salaries be paid in turnips? What if they did not like turnips? Admittedly they could barter them or sell them to a grocery store. It seems like it would be a lot simpler if the peasants just sold them directly and paid their taxes in currency.<sup>78</sup>

Trade unions would be limited to promoting vocational training and development.<sup>79</sup> Otto's economic programme went hand in hand with anti-urban sentiment. Urban workers were supposed to be resettled in rural areas to join the ranks of the peasantry, especially in the east of Germany. Otto regarded life in "tentacular towns as a danger to the human race".<sup>80</sup> Hence Germany's capital should be relocated to a small town like Regensburg or Goslar. One might note that such anti-urban ideals were also shared by Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenburg, a German civil servant who used to be a follower of the Strasser brothers and was executed for his participation in the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler. Schulenburg proposed that civil servants should be given land grants to shield them from the pernicious influence of the cities.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, he demanded that cities destroyed by Allied bombings should not be rebuilt. He also

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<sup>76</sup> Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 177.

<sup>77</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 170.

<sup>78</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 174-175.

<sup>80</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 150-151.

<sup>81</sup> Mommsen, Hans, *Alternative zu Hitler: Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Widerstandes* (Munich, 2000), p- 232 and p. 246-247.

wanted to limit urban sprawl and impose a ban on the establishment of industrial facilities in cities of a certain size.<sup>82</sup>

As in the Eberfeld programme, corporatist associations were meant to form the building blocks of governance on the local, regional, and national level. Unlike the Nazi regime, Otto advocated administrative decentralisation. Under his programme, Germany would be divided into 12 to 14 provinces, though financial and cultural policies would have to be uniform.<sup>83</sup> This is accompanied by an “organically structured system” of corporatist associations, from the local vocational and peasant councils to a Reich chamber. Otto wrote this manifesto while in exile and presumably wanted to impress the Western Allies so that he could play an important role in post-war Germany. No doubt this explains the manifesto’s ostensible anti-militarism and anti-revanchism.<sup>84</sup> But it cannot be assumed that he was just pandering. If he had been, he would have certainly not attacked capitalism as totalitarian. Nor would he have demanded a policy of autarky and a state monopoly on foreign trade.<sup>85</sup> This, incidentally, stands in contradiction to his tirades against the all-powerful state.

Executive power was to be vested in a Reich president, who would serve for life. He would share power with a Great Council comprised of the provincial presidents, five Reich ministers and the presidium of the corporatist Reich Chamber of Estates. The council would elect the president by a simple majority vote. The Reich Chamber of Estates was to preside over a tiered system of chambers of estates and consist of 10 nominated and 100 elected members. In theory, these three entities were supposed to wield equal power, with any law requiring the assent of two bodies. However, this is undermined by the fact that the provincial presidents would be appointed by the Reich president, who would also nominate 10 members of the Reich Chamber of Estates. As such checks and balances would only exist on paper. Otto called his system an “authoritarian democracy”, which he viewed as distinct from both a dictatorship and “mass dominion”. It is certainly authoritarian, but oligarchic rather than democratic.<sup>86</sup>

Political parties would be abolished.<sup>87</sup> In their place, Otto proposed a tiered system of vocational councils for workers, peasants, the liberal professions, industry and trade, as well as employees and officials. In other words, he reproduces the tiered structure outlined by the Eberfeld programme. The vocational councils would only be directly elected on the local level. Somehow, this is meant to ensure that only the best would be elected to the next highest administrative level.<sup>88</sup> The vocational councils of a circle (district) would elect their provincial representatives, who in turn would elect the vocational councils of the Reich.<sup>89</sup> Vocational councils were meant to supervise wages, working conditions, and vocational training and be consulted by the government on all vocational questions. Moreover, they would nominate candidates for vacant “fiefs”, though this would require the approval of the respective state authority.<sup>90</sup> The elected component of the circle, provincial and Reich Chamber of Estates

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<sup>82</sup> Mommsen, *Alternative zu Hitler*, p. 81-82.

<sup>83</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 185-188.

<sup>84</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 102-104.

<sup>85</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 137-139.

<sup>86</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 182-184.

<sup>87</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 193-195.

<sup>89</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 197.

<sup>90</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 194.

would be elected by their respective vocational councils. Just as the Reich Chamber of Estates has an appointed component, so do its corresponding lower bodies.<sup>91</sup> On paper, the composition of each chamber of estates was supposed to reflect the demographic makeup of the respective area. However, no vocation was supposed to make up more than 50% of the members of a chamber. No doubt Otto did not want to take the risk of urban workers achieving a majority that might get in the way of his dream of turning them into farmers.<sup>92</sup>

In foreign affairs, the manifesto supports the establishment of a European Federation to protect Europe from the “Bolshevik peril”.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, the manifesto proposes turning Poland into a bulwark against the Soviet Union.<sup>94</sup> However, it does not abandon imperialist and colonialist pretensions. Germany’s former colonies in Africa as well as the African colonies of Belgium and, for some reason, Portugal, would be replaced under the joint administration of all European powers, with the notable exception of Great Britain, France, Italy, and Spain. In other words, they would be essentially run by Germany. To camouflage this obvious attempt to acquire a German colonial empire by stealth, Otto proposed the foundation of a European Colonial Company (ECC). He states that Germany would be prepared to unconditionally hand over its (non-existent) colonial rights to the ECC.<sup>95</sup> At the time, Germany’s former African colonies were League of Nation “mandates” that were part of France’s and Britain’s colonial empires. As such Germany had no colonial “rights” to sign over in the first place. It should be obvious how delusional his colonial aspirations were.

In conclusion, neither Gregor nor Otto Strasser was a “National Bolshevik” or “radical socialists”. Their world view was authoritarian, racist, corporatist and anti-capitalist. Far from endorsing a “red-brown” takeover, they both sought to chart a “third way” between the two extremes of laissez-faire capitalism and a centrally planned economy. In the process, they devised an economic system that awkwardly combined private initiative, state direction and communalism with agrarian romanticism and nostalgia for the “good old days” of the medieval era. Like many other right-wing politicians, they sought to replace political parties with state-controlled corporatist associations. Politically, they wanted to transform the Weimar Republic into a nationalist, racist and authoritarian state. These beliefs were radical, and their economic concepts were characterised by considerable naivete and ignorance. But much of what they preached was not uncommon among conservatives and the far-right in Germany at the time. Of the two, Otto was likely more the ideologue, while Gregor was a highly flexible politician. At the end of the day, Otto ended up in political obscurity, while Gregor remained a leading player in the Nazi Party until his resignation. But neither was a credible challenger to Hitler. It is doubtful that Gregor had the intention of being one, and Otto comprehensively failed in his attempt.

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<sup>91</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 197.

<sup>92</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 198.

<sup>93</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 114.

<sup>94</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 92-93.

<sup>95</sup> Strasser, *Germany Tomorrow*, p. 111-113.

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