

Defining the *Volk*: Willy Hellpach's *Völkerpsychologie* between National Socialism and Liberal Democracy, 1934-1954

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Summary

This article introduces the *Völkerpsychologie* of the German psychologist and liberal politician Willy Hellpach. It shows how Hellpach used the once venerable approach of *Völkerpsychologie*, introduced by Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal in the nineteenth century, to adapt to the Third Reich and distract the authorities from his political career. The article provides a close reading of Hellpach's main text on the subject, the *Einführung in Völkerpsychologie* published in 1938, and explains the ease with which he was able to make this approach compatible with Nazi ideology. Hellpach's case thus illustrates the proximity of national-liberal thinking to 'Nazi ideology'. Moreover, on account of the postwar reception of Hellpach's *Völkerpsychologie* by scholars such as Ralf Dahrendorf, the article examines the uneasy and incomplete repudiation of *Völkerpsychologie* after 1945. It concludes that the origins of widely used concepts such as 'national habitus' or 'national identity' can be traced back to the tradition of *Völkerpsychologie* and related studies of national character.

Key words Willy Hellpach; *Völkerpsychologie*; National Socialism; national character; German mind

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When Willy Hellpach (1877–1955) published his *Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie* in 1938, he continued a venerable tradition in German intellectual life which had started with the publication of the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* by Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal in 1859. Lazarus and Steinthal had launched the ambitious project to establish the ‘laws of development’ of civilization by studying of the human mind (*Volksgeist*) as represented by its ‘products’, namely language, myths and customs. While Lazarus and Steinthal’s approach was much criticized from the start, their proto-social science epitomized liberal thinking in the nineteenth century with its belief in progress, science and the nation. Lazarus and Steinthal were succeeded by the eminent psychologist Wilhelm Wundt who dedicated the last twenty years of his career to writing a comprehensive study of *Völkerpsychologie* that was published in ten massive volumes between 1900 and 1920. Similar to Lazarus and Steinthal, Wundt tried to provide a universal account of the development of mankind and distinguished his approach from political-literary studies of national character. However, after Wundt’s death in 1920, *Völkerpsychologie* lacked an energetic and dedicated proponent. The field did not flourish in the interwar period, despite the increased interest in popular studies on ‘national character’ during and after the propaganda battles of the First World War.¹

¹ On the *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus, Steinthal and Wundt see Moritz Lazarus, *Grundzüge der Völkerpsychologie und Kulturwissenschaft*, edited by Christian Köhnke (Hamburg, 2003); Matti Bunzl, ‘*Völkerpsychologie* and German-Jewish Emancipation’, in *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, edited by H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl (Ann Arbor, MI, 2003), 47–85; Georg Eckardt, ed. *Völkerpsychologie: Versuch einer Neuentdeckung* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1997); Ivan Kalmar, ‘The *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal and the Modern Concept of Culture’, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*

In 1938, Hellpach, a former student of Wundt at the University of Leipzig, claimed that his study of folk psychology represented the crowning of a life-long interest in the subject. His book, a concise introduction to the field suitable for university teaching, was the first full-length study on the topic since 1920 and turned him into the major representative of a ‘discipline’ that did not really exist.² Despite his claims, however, it was only after the establishment of the Nazi-regime that Hellpach made *Völkerpsychologie* the focus of his academic work. His concentration on the subject in the 1930s was largely the result of his personal circumstances: as a former liberal politician and representative of the Weimar ‘system’, Hellpach was forced to abstain from political work and journalism after 1933. He was, however, allowed to keep his professorship in psychology at the University of Heidelberg where he taught throughout the Third Reich. To avoid conflicts with the new regime, he reoriented his research towards *Völkerpsychologie*. This new focus, then, was part of his personal strategy to adapt to the conditions of the Third Reich, and as such a clever choice. *Völkerpsychologie* provided Hellpach with an opportunity to reconcile himself with the Third Reich and to avoid denunciation and censorship, since the topic fitted in neatly with Nazi-endorsed studies into the German *Volk*, *Volkstum* and *Volksgeschichte*, which were thriving on account of their – real or perceived – compatibility with the *völkisch* ideology of the Nazis.³

48 (1987), 671–90; Egbert Klautke, ‘The Mind of the Nation: The Debate about *Völkerpsychologie*, 1859–1900’, in *Central Europe* 8.1 (2010), 1–19.

² Willy Hellpach, *Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie* (Stuttgart, 1938).

³ See Thomas Hauschild, ed. *Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht: Ethnologie im Dritten Reich* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1995); Willy Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte: methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft, 1918–1945* (Göttingen, 1993); Peter Schöttler, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Frankfurt-on-

After the Second World War, Hellpach claimed that he had always kept his intellectual independence intact, even under the repressive conditions of the Nazi dictatorship. A thorough reading of this text, however, provided in the first part of this article, shows that his study was a conscious attempt to make *Völkerpsychologie* compatible with Nazi ideology.⁴ Hellpach thus provides a telling case of the behaviour of an average German academic who neither openly supported nor actively opposed the Third Reich. More generally, it demonstrates the ease with which national-liberal intellectuals could adapt to the Nazi regime, on account of a substantial overlap between national-liberal and national-socialist ideas.⁵ Not surprisingly, Hellpach

Main, 1997); Frank Rutger Hausmann, ed., *Die Rolle der Geisteswissenschaften im Dritten Reich* (Munich, 2002); Carsten Klingemann, *Soziologie im Dritten Reich* (Baden-Baden, 1996).

- ⁴ On Hellpach's biography see his autobiography *Wirken in Wirren. Lebenserinnerungen. Eine Rechenschaft über Wert und Glück, Schuld und Sturz meiner Generation*, 2 vols (Hamburg, 1948). The third volume of this autobiography was only published posthumously in 1987; see, *Hellpach-Memoiren 1925–1945*, edited by Christoph Führ and Hans-Georg Zier (Cologne and Vienna, 1987). A full-scale academic biography of Hellpach is not available. Claudia Anja Kaune, *Willy Hellpach (1877–1955): Biographie eines liberalen Politikers der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 2005), is keen to present Hellpach as a defender of the Weimar Republic, but largely ignores his academic work and his behaviour during the Third Reich. See also Christian Jansen, 'Willy Hellpach. Ein antiliberaler Demokrat kommentiert den Niedergang der Weimarer Republik', *Völkische Bewegung – Konservative Revolution – Nationalsozialismus: Aspekte einer politisierten Kultur*, edited by Walter Schmitz (Dresden, 2005); Klaus A. Lankenau, 'Willy Hellpach: Ein Leben zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik', in *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 134 (1986), 359–75.
- ⁵ Hellpach's *Völkerpsychologie* has only received scant attention: see Horst Gundlach, 'Willy Hellpachs Sozial- und Völkerpsychologie unter dem Aspekt der

remained silent about the similarities between his *Völkerpsychologie* and Nazi ideology after the end of the Nazi dictatorship; instead, he stressed the continuities of his approach from the turn of the century to the post-war period as proof of his innocence. But even the critics of his *Völkerpsychologie* after 1945 did not pick up on the more than obvious concessions Hellpach had made to Nazi ideology, and instead treated him as an old-fashioned thinker not able to keep abreast of the most recent academic works and theories. This hesitance on the part of his critics illustrates the predicament of liberal academics after 1945 who were desperate to understand and explain the ‘German catastrophe’ and the German ‘divergence from the West’, but felt uneasy about concepts such as ‘national character’ which were soon associated with Nazi thinking. In this situation, the terminology of *Völkerpsychologie* was dropped by a new generation of academics and intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, while the concepts on which the approach rested were inconspicuously transformed and translated into a new social-scientific jargon. *Völkerpsychologie* has thus remained on the agenda of the humanities and social sciences, albeit in disguised form, hidden behind a new terminology.

I.

Similar to many of his contemporaries, Willy Hellpach was blinded by the double crisis of the political and economic system of the Weimar Republic after 1930, and

Auseinandersetzung mit der Rassenideologie’, in *Rassenmythos und Sozialwissenschaften in Deutschland: Ein verdrängtes Kapitel sozialwissenschaftlicher Wirkungsgeschichte*, edited by Carsten Klingemann (Opladen, 1987), 242–76; Walter Stallmeister and Helmut E. Lück, ‘Die Völkerpsychologie im Werk von Willy Hellpach’, in *Wilhelm Wundts anderes Erbe: Ein Mißverständnis klärt sich auf*, edited by Gerd Jüttemann (Göttingen, 2006) 116–27.

underestimated the threat posed by the National Socialists. The ‘Hitler party’ appeared to him first and foremost as a generational phenomenon: the Nazis represented the young generation in Germany, with its characteristic search for the ‘unconditional’ (*das Unbedingte*), which explained the activism and the urgency of the national-revolutionary movement. The main difference between the Nazis and other parties lay in the style of their politics, Hellpach concluded, not in the substance of their demands or their main aims.⁶ The Nazis and their followers did raise serious and legitimate concerns about the political and economic crisis in Germany. But since the Nazis exaggerated their demands, in a typically youthful fashion, Hellpach predicted their rapid decline, similar to that of the populist anti-Semitic parties of the 1880s and 1890s which had disappeared quickly after initial electoral successes.⁷ As a radical party of protest, the NSDAP would not have any long-term impact. It was not necessary to take the Nazis’ ideology seriously; accordingly, Hellpach refused to read Hitler’s autobiography-cum-manifesto *Mein Kampf* – to which he referred as an ‘opera score’ – or to follow the national-socialist press.⁸

After the hand-over of power to the Nazis in 1933, Hellpach immediately ran into difficulties with the new government because of his earlier political career as a member of the DDP: Hellpach had become Minister of Education in the State of Baden in 1922, served as Minister President of Baden in 1924–25, was the candidate of the DDP in the first round of the presidential elections in 1925, and served as

⁶ Willy Hellpach, ‘Generationen’, *Vossische Zeitung*, 16 April 1933, 1–2. See Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002).

⁷ Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven and London, 1975).

⁸ Führ and Zier, *Hellpach-Memoiren*, 133.

Member of the *Reichstag* from 1928 to 1930. In addition, his political journalism had been published in the leading German-language newspapers of the period, including the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* and the *Neue Freie Presse*. Even though Hellpach had been an outspoken critic of the parliamentary system of the Weimar Republic that resembled the right-wing enemies of the state – in his autobiography Hellpach reported that the only speech he gave in parliament earned him applause from the National Socialists, to his own surprise and embarrassment⁹ – the Nazis identified Hellpach as a former representative of the Weimar ‘system’ and penalized him for this exposed position. On the basis of paragraph 12 of the ‘Law for the Reinstitution of the Professional Civil Service’ (*Reichsgesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*), introduced in April 1933, the pension he drew as professor emeritus at the Technical University Karlsruhe was cut from 720 to 390 Reichsmark; he also had to give up his lucrative work as a freelance journalist.¹⁰ Hellpach took this decision as a political, disciplinary measure and considered himself a ‘victim’ of the new regime.¹¹

However, even though the take-over of power by the Nazis brought about a serious deterioration of Hellpach’s living-standard and his public status, he did not suffer from further repression during the Third Reich. Quite to the contrary, he was

⁹ Ibid., 74–75. Hellpach’s Reichstag speech on education policy is printed in *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 4. Wahlperiode 1928*, vol. 425 (Berlin, 1928), 2241–49.

¹⁰ See the text of the law in, ed. *Gesetze des NS-Staats: Dokumente eines Unrechtssystems*, edited by Ingo von Münch, third edition (Paderborn, 1994), 26–28.

¹¹ See the correspondence in Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, Bestand N Hellpach, No. 6; Führ and Zier, *Hellpach-Memoiren*, 275–77; Horst Gundlach, ‘Willy Hellpach; Attributionen’, in *Psychologie im Dritten Reich*, edited by Carl F. Graumann (Berlin, 1986), 165–95 (170–73).

allowed to continue teaching at the University of Heidelberg, and refocused his energies on his academic work. In 1934, Hellpach had re-established himself as an academic when he was invited as a member of the official German delegation to the International Congress for Philosophy in Prague in 1934.¹² The simple fact that the former democratic politician Hellpach officially represented the National-Socialist state at this event caused a scandal. Moreover, the topic he presented at the conference looked like a kowtow to the new German government: he spoke on ‘The Volk as Natural Fact, Mental Form and Creation of the Will’ (*Das Volk als Naturtatsache, geistige Gestalt und Willensschöpfung*) and thus for the first time presented the three-fold definition of the concept *Volk* which would form the basis of his book on *Völkerpsychologie*.¹³ During his talk, Hellpach ignored the sensitivities of the émigré community in Prague when he stated that every ‘genuine culture was intolerant and totalitarian’ (*intolerant und totalitär*), which suggested that he agreed with the violent persecution of the Nazis’ opponents. In particular his use of the term *totalitär* led to a heated debate at the conference. After the Prague congress, Hellpach’s reputation amongst the German émigré community was irredeemably damaged.¹⁴ International observers of the Prague conference shared this perception.

¹² Walter Stallmeister, ‘Willy Hellpachs Auftritt beim Internationalen Kongreß für Philosophie in Prag 1934’, in *Willy Hellpach: Beiträge zu Werk und Biographie*, edited by idem and Helmut E. Lück (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1991), 46–58; Klingemann, *Soziologie im Dritten Reich*, 236–39. Cf. Gundlach, ‘Willy Hellpachs Sozial- und Völkerpsychologie’, in Klingemann, *Rassenmythos*, 256–63.

¹³ Hellpach’s lecture was published as Willy Hellpach, ‘Volk als Naturtatsache, geistige Gestalt und Willensschöpfung’ in *Volksspiegel* 1 (1934), 209–17; a shortened version appeared under the same title in *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 10 (1934), 389–90.

¹⁴ Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann, for instance, on hearing the news about Hellpach’s performance at the Prague conference in his Swiss exile, was outraged

To the Czech philosopher Jan Blahoslav Kozák, Hellpach had provided a ‘definition of sociology’ that was ‘entirely nationalistic and partial’.¹⁵ To an American observer, Hellpach left the impression of providing ‘a philosophical defence of the present government in Germany’.¹⁶

Hellpach himself, however, never prone to self-criticism, saw himself as the victor of the ‘battle of speeches at Prague’. He insisted that his presentation had made no concessions to Nazi ideology since he had defined the *Volk* not from a purely biological point of view, as the racial ideology of the Nazis would have demanded, but had put equal emphasis on the ‘mental form’ of the *Volk*. During the debate at the Prague conference, he had used the example of the legendary Czechoslovak president Tomáš G. Masaryk to show that the *Volk* was the ‘fundamental form of human communities’: During the First World War, Hellpach explained, Masaryk had abandoned ‘his family, his friends, his professorship and his students’ in order to create a state ‘for his *Volk*’.¹⁷ Reichs-German members in the audience agreed that Hellpach had defended his ground well and saw his presentation as a success.¹⁸ Both

by his behaviour. See Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher 1933–1934*, edited by Peter de Mendelssohn (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1977), 32, 526.

¹⁵ Jan Blahoslav Kozák, ‘The Prague Congress of Philosophy’, in *Slavonic and East European Review* 13 (1935), 330–36 (333). See L.J. Walker, ‘The International Congress on Philosophy held at Prague, September 2–7, 1934’, in *Philosophy* 10 (1935), 3–14.

¹⁶ C. Krusé, ‘The Eighth International Congress of Philosophy’, in *Philosophical Review* 44 (1935), 46–56 (49). Similar E. Nagel, ‘The Eighth International Congress of Philosophy’, in *Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1934), 589–601 (593).

¹⁷ Führ and Zier, *Hellpach-Memoiren*, 278–82.

¹⁸ Hans Hartmann, *Begegnung mit Europäern: Gespräche mit Gestaltern unserer Zeit*, (Thun, 1954), 119: ‘Schon die Tatsache der einhelligen Begeisterung über diesen Vortrag zeigt, daß es bei einigem Mut auch für deutsche Forscher möglich

sides of the debate in Prague had a point: Hellpach's argument that the study of the *Volk* had to be the starting point of any *social* science repeated the mantra of older *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus, Steinthal and Wundt, but could easily be essentialized and adapted to the *völkisch* ideology of the Nazis. In contrast to earlier versions of *Völkerpsychologie*, which had stressed the 'unity of mankind', however, Hellpach presented a formula for 'differential' *Völkerpsychologie*: He abandoned the universalist perspective that had characterized Wundt's approach and stressed the uniqueness of each individual *Volk*. He also put more emphasis on the ethnic and biological foundations of the *Volk*. His version of *Völkerpsychologie* was thus fully compatible with the *völkisch* ideology of the Nazi government, despite Hellpach's insistence on his intellectual independence.

Hellpach's *Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie*, based around the presentation to the Prague conference in 1934, was finally published in 1938. Similar to Lazarus, Steinthal and Wundt, Hellpach adamantly stressed the strictly academic character of his approach and distanced himself from travel writers and journalists who speculated about national characters. Moreover, *Völkerpsychologie*, Hellpach explained, was part of a broader interest in German academia that put the study of the *Volk* at its centre. However, Hellpach was not interested in a scholastic debate about the legitimacy or even primacy of different approaches to the study of the *Volk*: 'I am not afraid to admit that I do not care at all whether *Völkerpsychologie* is called a "discipline" or a "branch" of psychology, sociology, or folklore (*Volkskunde*), or if it

war, weiter ihrer Linie treu zu bleiben.' See Hans Driesch, *Lebenserinnerungen: Aufzeichnungen eines Forschers und Denkers in entscheidender Zeit* (Munich and Basle, 1951), 274.

is referred to as an “approach” or a “point of view”.¹⁹ This statement referred to critical remarks made by Max Hildebert Boehm in a private letter to Hellpach. Boehm had complimented Hellpach on his *Völkerpsychologie*, but expressed his concern that the ‘fundamentally flawed term *Völkerpsychologie*’ had been resurrected. Boehm reminded Hellpach that *Völkerpsychologie* had been invented by the Jewish scholars Lazarus and Steinthal, and that the term should, therefore, be avoided. Hellpach had really written a *Volkslehre*, not a study of *Völkerpsychologie*, Boehm argued. Hellpach replied that the concept of *Völkerpsychologie* had been ‘in the air’ in the mid-nineteenth century; it was only coincidence that Lazarus and Steinthal introduced it to scholarly debates. It was now impossible to eradicate every term or every discovery made by Jews in the past century. Furthermore, Hellpach insisted that *Völkerpsychologie* was the proper label for his study, while *Volkslehre* was both a larger concept – it studied more than just the ‘basic psychological processes of *Volksleben*’ – and more limited, since *Völkerpsychologie* dealt with all ‘peoples’, not just with one.²⁰

¹⁹ Hellpach, *Einführung*, v; see Adolf Bach, *Deutsche Volkskunde: Ihre Wege, Ergebnisse und Aufgaben*, (Leipzig, 1937); Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann, *Rassen- und Völkerkunde: Lebensprobleme der Rassen, Gesellschaften und Völker* (Braunschweig, 1936); Max Hildebert Böhm, *Volkskunde* (Berlin, 1937). See Willy Hellpach, ‘Volkswissenschaften, Völkerwissenschaften, Bevölkerungswissenschaft und die gesamte Psychologie’, in *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie* 100 (1938), 554–89. In this review article Hellpach discussed the above mentioned titles in detail and compared them to his *Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie*.

²⁰ Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, N Hellpach, No. 277 (allgemeine Korrespondenz), Prof. Dr. Max H. Boehm, Jena, to Hellpach, 19 November 1937; Hellpach to Boehm, 31 December 1937. Hellpach mentioned Boehm’s private letter in his review article ‘Volkswissenschaften, Völkerwissenschaften, Bevölkerungswissenschaft’, 577.

Despite the anti-Semitic nature of his remarks, Boehm had made a valid point when he characterized Hellpach's *Völkerpsychologie* as a *Volkslehre*: it was almost exclusively devoted to the definition of the term and the phenomenon *Volk*.

Repeating the main argument of his speech at the Prague conference in 1934, Hellpach defined the *Volk* in three ways: As a natural fact, Hellpach understood the *Volk* as a permanent and universal form of social organisation that could be found throughout history. *Völker* were the 'really existing form of permanent communities in which the human race (*das Menschengeschlecht*) lives'. The *Volk* constituted 'the natural and adequate community of fate for the hominid species' (*naturgegebene und geistgemäße Schicksalsgemeinschaft hominider Art*).²¹ While the 'völkisch form of life' was a basic phenomenon of human life, individual *Völker* were characterized by constant change. Hellpach thus repeated an established idea of older *Völkerpsychologie*: while nations or *Völker* developed and changed constantly, they could also decline and 'disappear'. But regardless of the exact character and development of individual peoples, the *Volk* was a principle of social organization, since man had always organized his communal life in this way.²²

Since 'environmentalism' argued that man was primarily formed by nurture, not by nature, and thus opposed the core idea of scientific racism, it was anathema to National Socialist ideology. Hellpach, the author of a study of 'geophysical influences' on the human mind, duly considered the importance of the environment for the development of the *Volk*, but, in order not to be mistaken as an 'environmentalist', did so in a way that fitted in with Nazi ideas of *Volk* and race.²³ He thus incorporated

²¹ Hellpach, *Einführung*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 22–4.

²³ See Willy Hellpach, *Die geopsychischen Erscheinungen: Wetter, Klima und Landschaft in ihrem Einfluß auf das Seelenleben* (Leipzig, 1911). This study was

the Nazi slogan of 'blood and soil', *Blut und Boden*, into his definition of the *Volk*. The make-up of the *Volk* depended on nature *and* nurture, Hellpach explained, and the slogan *Blut und Boden* was just a different way of putting this simple fact, thus shrewdly employing terms that were axiomatic to Nazi ideology and race theories. Furthermore, and following the geographer Friedrich Ratzel, one of his former teachers at the University of Leipzig, Hellpach argued that the *Volk* required an adequate *Lebensraum* or living space to prosper and develop. The racial structure of *Völker* confined them to certain areas: this was the essentially scientific meaning of the slogan 'blood and soil'.²⁴ While Hellpach had earlier agreed with the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas's critique of simplistic theories of race, he now made sure to distance himself from his views. Racial factors by far outweighed environmental factors in shaping a *Volk*, Hellpach argued in accordance with Nazi ideas. The 'ability to form a *Volk* and to exist in a *völkisch* way' was the yardstick to measure the ability of a race to adapt to an environment.²⁵ Against overly simplistic notions of 'race', Hellpach distinguished strictly between 'race' and '*Volk*': 'Race' was an important factor in forming a *Volk*, but not the only one. Furthermore, 'races' were not to be confused with 'species'.²⁶ Races were not characterized by specific character traits, but by hereditary factors which could develop in different ways, depending on environmental factors. Hellpach agreed that certain physical traits signified specific

Hellpach's longest-selling book; it remained in print until 1977 under the title *Geopsyche: Die Menschenseele unter dem Einfluß von Klima und Wetter, Boden und Landschaft*, eighth edition (Stuttgart, 1977). It was translated into French as *Géopsyché. L'âme humaine sous l'influence du temps, du climat, du sol et du paysage* (Paris, 1943).

²⁴ Hellpach, *Einführung*, 42–3.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

mental capabilities or characteristics, as race psychologists such as Egon von Eickstedt had argued. It was for instance possible, Hellpach claimed, that ‘blue eyes’ correlated with certain mental traits. Similar to most theorists of race, Hellpach chose a middling position concerning the question of ‘nature and nurture’ when he stressed that race was a major factor in the formation of the *Volk*, but not the only one.

While Hellpach criticized simplistic race theories, he agreed with notions that were integral to scientific racism in the interwar period. In particular, he was convinced that the ‘clash’ of different races necessarily led to ‘psychological tensions’, both within individuals and within nations. Whereas nations that consisted of very different ‘racial groups’ experienced internal tensions, individuals of mixed race showed a mental instability that increased the larger the ‘distance’ between the races was. Racists all over the world had used this notion in their campaign against the mixing of races, immigration and ‘miscenigation’, and Hellpach presented it as a fact that *Völkerpsychologie* had to take into account.²⁷ In his judgement on the importance of race, then, Hellpach differed from traditional *Völkerpsychologie*. While he criticized the strict determinism of popular race theorists, he acknowledged that ‘race’ was a decisive factor in the shaping of a *Volk* and had to be fully taken into account.²⁸

The second part of Hellpach’s definition of the *Volk* concentrated on more traditional aspects of *Völkerpsychologie*. Defining the folk merely by ‘material’ conditions such as race and space, or ‘blood and soil’, remained incomplete, he

²⁷ Ibid., 36–7.

²⁸ Gundlach’s attempt to present Hellpach’s *Völkerpsychologie* as a subtle criticism of Nazi race ideologies, on account of his use of ‘chiffres’ and ‘codes’, is not convincing. See Gundlach, ‘Willy Hellpach’s Sozial- und Völkerpsychologie’, in Klingemann, *Rassenmythos*, 264–70.

argued. In addition, it was necessary to analyse and understand the ‘mental form’ of a *Volk*. All *Völker*, Hellpach argued, were characterized by five ‘basic mental traits’ (*geistige Urgüter*): language, clothing, tools, laws and commandments, and an idea of the beyond (*Jenseits*). These ‘basic mental traits’ represented a kind of universal minimum of civilization.²⁹ In particular, Hellpach explained that all ‘peoples’ developed a form of religion,³⁰ believed in specific myths and showed forms of ‘magical thinking’. According to Hellpach, all myths were ‘stories of world domination’ (*Weltherrschaftsgeschichten*), i.e. attempts to make sense of history by positioning one’s own nation at its centre. A ‘genuine myth’ demanded universal truth and claimed to be the only true story of the origin of the world. For this reason, ‘every real culture’ was ‘intolerant’.³¹ Hellpach distinguished between five different ‘founding myths’, namely totemism, theocracy, polity (*Politie*), enlightenment, and *Volkstum*. He thus adopted a concept of historical ‘stages’ in the development of mankind similar to Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*, but introduced a decisive change: instead of ‘humanity’, history now culminated in ‘nationhood’ (*Volkstum*). Hellpach thus put the hardly translatable German term *Volkstum* (introduced by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn) at the centre of his *Völkerpsychologie* and presented it as the highest form of historical development.³² To Hellpach, *Volkstum*, and not ‘culture’ or ‘humanity’, defined the ‘ultimate essence, the concept of the inner existence of any *Volk*’.³³ *Volkstum* represented the highest form of communal life, and had only been fully realized in Nazi Germany, Hellpach maintained. He thus made another major

²⁹ Hellpach, *Einführung*, 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 93; see also 146–47

³² *Ibid.*, 98–9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 106.

concession to Nazi ideology when he called National Socialism ‘the most passionate and unconditional idea and reality of the *Volkstum*’.³⁴

The final part of Hellpach’s study, and also its shortest, was devoted to the third ‘basic fact’ of all ‘ethnic communities’ and dealt with the *Volk* as a ‘creation of the will’. This chapter continued the discreet nazification of his *Völkerpsychologie*: the ‘leadership of the individual’, Hellpach claimed, was an essential precondition of the formation of the *Volk*. Only a leader (*Leitmensch*) could perform the action (*Tat*) necessary to create a *Volk*. The *Menschenführer* were the carriers of the will of the *Volk*. Hellpach thus introduced a voluntaristic element into his definition of the *Volk*, like Lazarus and in his wake Ernest Renan had done earlier. But instead of the ‘daily plebiscite’ of the members of the *Volk* who permanently recreated the nation, Hellpach introduced the *Führerprinzip*. The *Volk* was not the product of the shared will of its constituent members, he argued, but a ‘creation of the will’ of the leader.³⁵ It was shaped and formed by the actions of statesmen, generals, lawmakers, reformers or revolutionaries. The *Führer* did not even have to be representative of the characteristics his *Volk*. Quite in contrast, there was often an open tension between the leader and the majority of the people.³⁶ This introduction of the *Führerprinzip* into *Völkerpsychologie* was not only a nod to the Nazi regime, but allowed Hellpach to provide a simple answer to one of the crucial problems of *Völkerpsychologie*, namely the relationship between the individual and the community. He argued that the exceptional leader, i.e. the individual was the decisive force, not the community. To Hellpach, then, the interaction between individual and

³⁴ Ibid., 108.

³⁵ Ibid., 5, 6.

³⁶ Ibid., 133.

community was not complicated and complex, but simple, one-dimensional and hierarchical.

In contrast to earlier approaches to *Völkerpsychologie* by Lazarus, Steinthal and Wundt, Hellpach introduced important changes. Most importantly, he stressed the dependence of the *Volk* on biological factors. While he clearly distinguished between ‘race’ and *Volk*, he attributed decisive importance to racial factors in the shaping of the *Volk*. Secondly, Hellpach managed to marry ‘environmental’ arguments, normally anathema to Nazi theorists, with racialist ideas when he argued that ‘soil’ and ‘living space’ were preconditions for the formation of the *Volk*. Finally, he turned Lazarus’s subjective and voluntaristic definition of the nation on its head and introduced the *Führerprinzip* into the definition of the *Volk*. Not surprisingly, then, Hellpach’s *Völkerpsychologie* received very positive reviews upon its publication; it did not ‘cause a stir’, on account of its cleverly disguised criticism of Nazi race theories, but received almost universal acclaim.³⁷ The reviewer of the *Anthropologischer Anzeiger*, for instance, admired the way Hellpach had connected *Völkerpsychologie* with race psychology, and commended his discussion of the relationship between race and *Volk*.³⁸ Hellpach’s friend Karl Haushofer, the inventor of ‘geopolitics’, former student of Friedrich Ratzel and erstwhile teacher of Rudolf Hess, compared Hellpach’s *Völkerpsychologie* favourably with Wilhelm Wundt’s overly lengthy contributions.³⁹ The reviewer of the *Geographische Zeitschrift*

³⁷ Cf. Gundlach, ‘Willy Hellpachs Sozial- und Völkerpsychologie’, in Klingemann, *Rassenmythos*, 264.

³⁸ A. Harasser, ‘Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*’, in *Anthropologischer Anzeiger* 15 (1938), 81.

³⁹ Karl Haushofer, ‘Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*’, in *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* 15 (1938), 133. Similar Friedrich Zahn, ‘Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*’, in *Allgemeines Statistisches Archiv* 27 (1938), 475; J. Glück,

criticized his references to Franz Boas, but still praised Hellpach's 'brilliant and original presentation'.⁴⁰ Bruno Petermann, the author of a study on race psychology, wrote equally enthusiastically about Hellpach's 'highly recommendable' textbook: 'The result is a comprehensive psychological study of the being of the *Volk* [*volkhaften Daseins*].'⁴¹ And even though none of Hellpach's many publications were translated into English, his *Völkerpsychologie* did not go unnoticed in Britain and the USA: the reviewer for the journal of the British *International African Institute*, who published his text in German, commended Hellpach's book, while Charles Diserens, a psychologist at the University of Cincinnati, saw clear progress in Hellpach's study compared to Wundt. He particularly agreed with Hellpach's treatment of the question of race.⁴²

Hellpach acted inconspicuously during the Third Reich and avoided any conflict with the Nazi regime. He regularly participated in international academic conferences – increasingly instrumentalized by the Nazis to disseminate propaganda to international audiences – at a time when only 'trusted' academics were allowed to do so. For instance, in addition to the annual meetings of the German Association of Psychology, he participated in the congress of the International Union for the

'Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie* and *Geopsyche*, fifth edition', in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 73 (1941) [published 1944], 122–23.

⁴⁰ Georg Spannhaus, 'Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*', in *Geographische Zeitschrift* 47 (1941), 236.

⁴¹ Bruno Petermann, 'Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*', in *Zeitschrift für Rassenkunde* 7 (1938), 308. See also Richard Thurnwald, 'Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*', in *Historische Zeitschrift* 159 (1939), 103–5.

⁴² P. A. H. Werder, 'Review of Hellpach, Einführung in die *Völkerpsychologie*', in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 11 (1938), 516–17; Carl Diserens, 'Review of Hellpach, Einführung in die *Völkerpsychologie*', in *The American Journal of Psychology* 51 (1938), 774–75.

Scientific Investigation of Population Problems (IUSSIP), which was held in Berlin in 1935.⁴³ The anthropologist Eugen Fischer served as chairman of the congress, and used it as a forum to praise Adolf Hitler in front of the 500 international participants. The Führer, Fischer claimed, had ‘clearly understood the deep and important meaning of population policies’.⁴⁴ In his everyday life, Hellpach behaved inconspicuously, too. While he never joined the NSADP – indeed, it seems likely that he would not have been accepted by the party even if he had applied for membership, because of his past political activity – he had sworn the oath to the ‘Führer’ that was required of civil servants, including university teachers, and signed his private letters with ‘Heil Hitler’.⁴⁵ In 1939, like the majority of Germans, Hellpach was delighted with the foreign policy successes of the Third Reich.⁴⁶ During the war, Hellpach

⁴³ See. Willy Hellpach, ‘Entstehung und Ausformung von Großstadtgauschlägen’, in *Bevölkerungsfragen: Bericht des Internationalen Kongresses für Bevölkerungsfragen, Berlin 1935*, edited by Hans Harmsen and Franz Lohse (Munich, 1936), 221–27; on the development of academic psychology in Germany during the Third Reich see Mitchell G. Ash, ‘Psychologie’, in *Die Rolle der Geisteswissenschaften im Dritten Reich, 1933–1945*, edited by Frank Rutger Hausmann (Munich, 2002), 229–64; Carl F. Graumann, ed., *Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 1985).

⁴⁴ Stefan Kühl, *Die Internationale der Rassisten: Aufstieg und Niedergang der internationalen Bewegung für Eugenik und Rassenhygiene im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1997), 131–37; Heidrun Kaupen-Haas and Christian Saller, eds, *Wissenschaftlicher Rassismus: Analysen einer Kontinuität in den Human- und Naturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1997).

⁴⁵ Gundlach, ‘Hellpach – Attributionen’, in Graumann, *Geschichte*, 178–79. See Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, N Hellpach, No. 279–296.

⁴⁶ In a letter to Karl Haushofer Hellpach showed himself pleased by the German occupation of the Czech lands since now ‘the old, honourable name “Bohemia” will be revered again in its German meaning’. See Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, ed., *Karl*

profited from the further ‘professionalization’ of psychology in Germany. With the introduction of a new uniform degree structure for psychologists in 1942, Hellpach, then the only professor of psychology at the University of Heidelberg, became director of the newly established Psychological Institute. While plans to promote Hellpach to a full professorship were turned down, he thus still managed to improve his status and standing at the University.⁴⁷ The new degree programme (*Diplomprüfungsordnung*) responded to the demand for psychologists by the *Wehrmacht* during the war, and established psychology as an independent discipline at German universities, concluding its emancipation from departments of philosophy.⁴⁸ In 1943, Hellpach came into direct contact with the race experts of the SS when he was invited to cooperate with the Reinhard-Heydrich-Foundation in Prague. The foundation, directed by the historian Hans-Joachim Beyer and the psychologist Rudolf Hippus, was an independent research institute that functioned as a think-tank of the SS, and was involved in plans to ‘Germanize’ the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia after the war. Beyer, who had met Hellpach at a conference of the *Deutsches Auslands-Institut* in Stuttgart in 1938, had become interested in his studies in the physiognomy of the German ‘tribes’, which had finally been published in 1942, and invited Hellpach to conduct similar studies in the ‘Protectorate’, funded by the Heydrich-Foundation.⁴⁹ Hippus, a former student of the psychologist Felix Krueger, represented a form of *Völkerpsychologie* that included racial-psychological

Haushofer: Leben und Werk, 2 vols, (Boppard: Boldt, 1979), II: Ausgewählter Schriftwechsel 1917–1946, 371–73.

⁴⁷ Gundlach, ‘Hellpach – Attributionen’, in Graumann, *Geschichte*, 186.

⁴⁸ Ulfried Geuter, *Die Professionalisierung der deutschen Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1988), 359.

⁴⁹ Willy Hellpach, *Deutsche Physiognomik: Grundlegung zu einer Naturgeschichte der Nationalgesichter* (Berlin, 1942).

studies that he had conducted at the Reich University of Posen before moving on to Prague. It is unlikely that Hellpach did not realize the political function of this research institute, as he later claimed in his memoirs.⁵⁰

After 1945, Hellpach maintained that his studies on *Völkerpsychologie* had made no concessions to Nazi race theories. His behaviour and attitude both during and after the Third Reich, however, show him as an intellectual fellow traveller of the regime. He acted in an opportunistic way, and successfully adapted to the new circumstances without moral inhibitions or a bad conscience. While he never tried to 'lead the leader' and influence politics directly with his advice and research, *Völkerpsychologie* became the vehicle for his adaptation to the Third Reich. For Hellpach, it proved dangerously easy to make his ideas about the *Volk*, the nation and race compatible with – genuine or perceived – Nazi ideology. Slight, but decisive changes in focus and stress sufficed to achieve this task.

II.

Even though immediately after the war Hellpach was briefly suspected of having been a collaborator with the Nazi regime, he was swiftly de-nazified by the American authorities in occupied Heidelberg and allowed to continue teaching at the University. After the establishing of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, Hellpach made an astonishing come-back on the public sphere. He received the highest awards, both for his academic work and for his role as a public intellectual: in 1952, he was the first recipient of the *Wundt-Medaille* from the German Association

⁵⁰ See Andreas Wiedemann, *Die Reinhard-Heydrich-Stiftung in Prag (1942–1945)* (Dresden, 2000, Karl-Heinz Roth, 'Heydrichs Professor. Historiographie des "Volkstums" und der Massenvernichtungen: Der Fall Hans-Joachim Beyer' in Schöttler, *Geschichtsschreibung*, 262–342.

of Psychology, awarded for his life-time contributions to the study of psychology. In the same year, he received the *Großes Bundesverdienstkreuz* of the young Federal Republic in recognition of his public engagement.⁵¹ Hellpach's newly acquired political-moral authority in post-war Germany led to a number of requests from former colleagues who had exposed themselves much more openly than Hellpach had done, and required '*Persilscheine*', i.e. positive character references that attested their clean past during the proceedings of de-nazification. One of the first academics to contact Hellpach was the former director of the Reinhard-Heydrich-Foundation in Prague, 'Himmler's professor' Hans-Joachim Beyer, who was evidently equipped with the right instinct regarding who could help his career after the collapse of the Third Reich.⁵² Following requests from the Lutheran church in Oldenburg and in Schleswig-Holstein, Hellpach provided such references for Beyer. He stressed that he had met Beyer only on three or four occasions during the Third Reich, but considered him one of the most talented experts on questions of *Volkstum* and population policies, who had, even during the Third Reich, maintained the highest academic standards. In contrast to other academics, Hellpach explained, Beyer had abstained from making concessions to the 'official race ideology and phraseology'. Hellpach claimed that he had no knowledge of the political function of the Reinhard-Heydrich-Foundation. Still, he seemed to be aware of the political role Beyer had played when he recommended that he should stay in the background for a while and not expose himself too much and too early after the war. After a period of two to three years, his

⁵¹ See the brief curriculum vitae of Hellpach on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, which stressed his versatility and his striving for a synthesis of the sciences and the humanities: 'Willy Hellpach zum 70. Geburtstag', in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 1 (1946), 404–7.

⁵² Beyer to Hellpach, 19 June 1945, in Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, N Hellpach, No. 442.

expert knowledge on the ethnic make-up of central and eastern Europe would be in demand again, considering the open question of Germany's eastern borders:

“‘Silence! Don't make any noise!’ is the best, and best intended, advice one can give to him in the meantime.’ In conclusion, Hellpach recommended giving Beyer a second chance, but to do so with caution.⁵³ This statement is remarkable, since Hellpach did not write positive references for anyone. For instance, he refused to provide references for the psychologist Gerhard Pfahler, who had openly supported the Third Reich and had become a genuine Nazi scientist, and for Friedrich Keiter, who had exposed himself with studies on ‘race psychology’.

Ironically, in order to present himself as untainted by Nazism, after 1945 Hellpach stressed the continuity of his studies in *Völkerpsychologie*. *Völkerpsychologie*, he claimed, had nothing to do with Nazi ideology; in fact, it had been the very opposite of the kind of ‘race psychology’ that the *Rassenpolitisches Amt* of the NSDAP under Alfred Rosenberg had propagated. The third edition of Hellpach's *Introduction to Völkerpsychologie* was published in 1954 and left largely unchanged. It was accompanied by a popular book on the *German Character* aimed at a non-specialist, general audience which introduced the main tenets of *Völkerpsychologie* with Hellpach assuming the role of the academic expert who explained the complicated subject-matter of his discipline in simple terms to laymen.⁵⁴ Reflections on German peculiarities and the *Volkscharakter* of the Germans were interwoven with comments on Germany's future outlook. In fact, the book was largely a collection of reflections, anecdotes and reminiscences typical of an

⁵³ See the copies of Hellpach's references in *ibid.*, Nachlaß Hellpach, No. 442: “‘Stille! Kein Geräusch gemacht!’ ist der beste, der bestgemeinte Rat, den man ihm vorerst machen kann.’

⁵⁴ Willy Hellpach, *Der Deutsche Charakter* (Bonn, 1954).

aging scholar. Instead of showing how to analyse the German ‘mind’, Hellpach presented a list of character traits of the Germans and their various ‘tribes’, very much in the fashion of popular studies of ‘national character’ that his *Völkerpsychologie* was meant to supersede. Hellpach expanded on the mutability of a nation’s character and used the same line of argument as in his *Introduction to Völkerpsychologie*: Between 1750 and 1830, he explained, the German character had been ‘schöngeistig’, dominated by the arts, philosophy and music. From 1830 to 1880, the Germans suddenly became ‘nutzgeistig’, absorbed by the economy, industry and technology. Between 1880 and 1945, the Germans had become ‘machtgeistig’, and were obsessed with power, the military, conquest and war. These quick changes over a relatively short period of time, Hellpach explained, demonstrated the limited use of racial theories for analysing national characters.⁵⁵ In addition, he stressed that a nation’s character was never uniform and coherent, but full of contradictions – a notion that should have raised doubts about the usefulness of the concept of a national character in the first place. Hellpach showed little interest in analysing a nation in all its complexity, but testified to his elitist and individualist views when he polemicized against the ‘crowd’ in the tradition of mass psychology. Some reviewers agreed with Hellpach’s characterization of the German ‘mind’. Hans von Krannhals, for instance, praised the ‘crystal-clear definitions’ of difficult concepts such as *Volk* and race. Also, Hellpach’s books included an ‘objective and clarifying’ interpretation of National Socialism, while a chapter on Adolf Hitler was a ‘psychological-political essay’ of outstanding quality.⁵⁶ Others were more critical of the aging scholar’s studies and saw him as belonging to an older generation who

⁵⁵ Ibid., 83–118.

⁵⁶ Hans v. Krannhals, ‘Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie* and *Der deutsche Charakter*’, in *Welt und Wort: Literarische Monatsschrift* 10 (1954), 376–77.

could not contribute anymore to the study of present-day society. His views on German history were based on ‘simplistic judgements’ and outdated concepts such as the notion of society as a ‘social organism’.⁵⁷ It was left to the French historian Henri Brunschwig to point out that Hellpach’s *Völkerpsychologie* had rephrased the *quintessence* of Nazi ideology in his treatment of race, and express his surprise that the study could have been reprinted in largely unchanged form ten years after the collapse of the Third Reich.⁵⁸

From the 1960s, *Völkerpsychologie* increasingly lost its reputation as a legitimate academic approach. After Hellpach’s death in 1955, no German scholar tried to develop the concept further or reform and adapt it to the changed intellectual landscape of the increasingly stable Federal Republic. Instead, a new generation of academics began to associate the very term *Völkerpsychologie* with Nazi ideology and racial theories, or at least with an outdated form of psychology that belonged to an intellectual heritage that might not have been directly responsible for Nazism, but had been incapable of preventing it. Doubts about the suitability of the concept of ‘national character’ were increasingly voiced by opponents of the Third Reich and the racist nationalism it had promoted. Frederick Hertz, the Austrian doyen of the study of nationalism who had already written a systematic critique of race theories before the First World War, published a major study on ‘Nationality in History and Politics’ in his English exile in 1944. In this work, Hertz argued that the very term ‘national character’ should be replaced by a less ambiguous one. As a substitute, he suggested speaking of a ‘national mentality’, since this term would reflect national traditions,

⁵⁷ Richard Meister, ‘Review of Hellpach, *Völkerpsychologie*, third edition’, in *Wiener Zeitschrift für Philosophie, Psychologie, Pädagogik* 6 (1956), 144–45.

⁵⁸ Henri Brunschwig, ‘Psychologie d’avant guerre’, in *Annales: Histoire, Sociétés* 10 (1955), 455–56.

but also social structures and the influence of ‘powerful individuals’ on the ‘mind’ of a nation – a definition that came close to Hellpach’s notion of *Volkstum*, but avoided its biologism.⁵⁹ The linguistic change that Hertz suggested, openly and consciously, was increasingly accepted and followed by scholars from the 1960s onwards, even if they had not read Hertz’s detailed war-time study:

However, despite the declining popularity of *Völkerpsychologie* in the 1950s and 1960s, it did not disappear suddenly from the intellectual landscape in Germany after the Second World War, and it never disappeared completely. The journalist, sociologist and philosopher of history Siegfried Kracauer provides a case in point: Kracauer was faced with the typical dilemma of students of the German ‘mind’ or ‘character’ when he prepared a study on German cinema, based on his comprehensive reviews of German films of the 1920s and 1930s and meant to explain the peculiarities of the German character. In this respect, he followed the recipe of traditional *Völkerpsychologie* when he tried to study the *Volksggeist* of the Germans as represented by its ‘emanations’, in his case films. Kracauer was well aware of the fact the study that would become *From Caligari to Hitler* was a piece of *Völkerpsychologie*, but felt uneasy about it: in a draft of his ‘book on film’, he stated that ‘the films of a nation reflect the mentality of this nation in a more direct way than other artistic media’ since they were the results of a collective effort, of ‘team work’. Films, Kracauer continued, offered an ‘incomparable means of access to the mentality they reflect’ since they revealed ‘those deep layers of collective mentality which more or less extend below the dimension of consciousness’. Still, Kracauer was adamant to distance himself from the idea of a fixed ‘national character’. His interest

⁵⁹ Frederick Hertz, *Nationality in History and Politics: A Study of the Psychology of National Sentiment and Character* (London, 1944), 41.

lay ‘exclusively in such collective dispositions or tendencies as prevail within a nation at a certain stage of its historic development’:

I am not stipulating a National Character. Against Anthropologists. They more or less eliminate History, and my modest task is simply to make visible the psychological factor instrumental in historic developments. I do not set apart German mentality as isolated entity. Certain German traits may appear everywhere (for instance Paralysis, double personality), and we are all human beings. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that, owing to its history, its geographical situation, the German people – any people – develops certain predilections, habits, idiosyncrasies, connected with certain stages of its history.⁶⁰

The sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, a rising star of the emerging social sciences in West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, and a member of the generation of ‘45ers’ who set out to integrate the Federal Republic firmly into the Western alliance, encountered similar problems as Kracauer when he tried to locate the reasons for the German ‘divergence from the West’ which, he was convinced, had made the rise of Nazism possible.⁶¹ Dahrendorf was one of the few scholars who not only implicitly, but openly criticized *Völkerpsychologie*. To this end, he included a damning critique of Hellpach’s contributions in his influential study on *Society and Democracy in*

⁶⁰ Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Nachlaß Kracauer, 72.3572/1: ‘Von Caligari bis Hitler, handschriftlicher Entwurf, abgeschlossen 7 April 1946’. See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, 1947).

⁶¹ A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, (New York and Cambridge, 2007).

Germany, one of the seminal German texts of the interpretation of German history as a *Sonderweg*. In order to demonstrate the fundamental flaws of any *Völkerpsychologie*, Dahrendorf chose Hellpach's weakest text, the popular study on the 'German Character'. He maintained that *Völkerpsychologie* always operated with the concept of an immutable 'national character', and was therefore 'tautological'. While he had no difficulties ridiculing the shortcomings of Hellpach's study, Dahrendorf ignored the long and venerable tradition of *Völkerpsychologie* in Germany from Lazarus and Steinthal to Wundt, which had by then been consigned to history. He also avoided a detailed critique of Hellpach's *Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie*, by far the more advanced and demanding text on the subject, and thus missed – or avoided – the chance to draw a direct line between *Völkerpsychologie* and Nazi ideology. He clearly felt uneasy about the whole idea of *Völkerpsychologie*, which seemed simplistic, outdated and dangerous, since it was based on speculations about 'character traits' that could only be hypothesized, but not proven. To Dahrendorf, Hellpach belonged to a generation of scholars that had not kept abreast with developments in the West, and whose value-laden concepts needed to be replaced by truly modern approaches to the social sciences.⁶²

The main questions that Hellpach and any *Völkerpsychologie* before him had posed, however, remained highly relevant to Dahrendorf's own research. After all, his aim was to analyse 'the peculiarities of German history'.⁶³ In the course of his study,

⁶² Ralf Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland*, (Munich, 1965), 36–37.

⁶³ This is the title of the classic critique of the theory of a German *Sonderweg*, which introduced this very term in the first place: David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). See also Egbert Klautke, 'Auf den Spuren des Sonderwegs: Zur Westorientierung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft in der

then, he was forced to re-introduce the very idea of a specific German ‘character’, since his overriding aim was to identify and explain the mental deformations of the German nation which had made National Socialism possible and which distinguished it from Western Nations, in particular the United Kingdom. For lack of a better solution, he recommended to employ the latest research methods of the American social sciences, i.e. to use opinion polls and surveys as evidence for the study of the peculiarities of the German mind. This would allow to drop the language of *Völkerpsychologie* with its romantic and idealist connotations, and to keep the conceptual frame – the idea of a peculiar German mind – in place.⁶⁴ It was a half-hearted solution that did not solve the problem Dahrendorf had identified, since even studying the ‘German mind’ with modern, quantitative methods – which had become that standard of the social sciences in the ‘West’ – did not provide a safeguard against essentializing the ‘mind of the nation’, its ‘identity’, ‘habitus’ or ‘political culture’.

Dahrendorf’s position represented the general climate in which *Völkerpsychologie* was dropped, and the dilemma his generation of scholars was faced with: the very term *Völkerpsychologie* reminded them of Nazi theories, and its main concepts stemmed from a bygone era that had been imbued with ‘irrational’, romantic traditions which were now identified as a central problem of German history because they had prevented, it was assumed, Germany’s development into a ‘normal’ Western nation, and thus enabled the success of the Nazis. This view of German history, albeit highly critical of ‘typical’ German traditions and character

Bundesrepublik’, in *Deutschland und die USA in der internationalen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Manfred Berg and Philipp Gassert (Stuttgart, 2004), 98–112; Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1997), 100–20.

⁶⁴ Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft*, 395–99.

traits, rested as much on notions of a German character as those of the German nationalists it criticized, and it offered no solution to the fundamental problems posed by the German *Sonderweg* – if one could not emigrate to the United Kingdom like Ralf Dahrendorf. The main questions which *Völkerpsychologie* had been concerned with, however – the formation of nations, the relationship between the individual and the community, the peculiarities of national ‘cultures’ – could not be as easily abandoned as the language it employed. These questions stayed on the agenda of the humanities and the social sciences, and made regular returns, albeit in different guises.⁶⁵ Hence, while *Völkerpsychologie* became increasingly associated with the study of ‘national characters’ and thus dubious to scholars who were adamant to break with any tradition related to National Socialism, the modes of thinking that had underpinned this approach, and had thus informed *Völkerpsychologie* since its invention, have been kept alive until the present day. The peculiar terminology of *Völkerpsychologie* may have been dropped, but only to be

⁶⁵ There are numerous examples of studies that continue the tradition of *Völkerpsychologie* without acknowledging it, see for example Reinhard Blomert, Helmut Kuzmics and Annette Treibel, eds, *Transformationen des Wir-Gefühls: Studien zum nationalen Habitus* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1993); Wolf Lepenies, *Kultur und Politik: Deutsche Geschichten* (Munich and Vienna, 2006); Peter Watson, *The German Genius: Europe’s Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution, and the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2010). A ‘classic’ of this kind is Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1989). For a study of one of the most successful substitute terms of *Völkerpsychologie*-in-disguise, i.e. the ubiquitous concept of ‘collective identity’, see Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Kultur* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2000).

replaced by a more modern-sounding language that speaks of 'national mentalities' or 'identities' rather 'national characters' and a *Volksgeist*.