Charlemagne in the Third Reich

TEUTONISM AND THE IMPERIAL IDEA

When Adolf Hitler seized power in Germany in 1933 he saw himself following in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors. The name of his Third Reich alone already referred to German history. To the Second German Empire that came into being after the Prussian-French war in 1871, when the Prussian King William II triumphantly crowned himself German Emperor William I in the hall of mirrors of Versailles. And to the First German Empire that went back to the division of the realm of Charlemagne and that lasted for a thousand years until Napoleon formally dissolved it in 1806. Hitler at least wanted to equal this, but his ‘thousand-year empire’ foundered after only 13 years after it had dragged along the whole world in a war that would ultimately take 50 million victims.

National Socialism misused history to legitimize its imperialist and racist policy. Historians and publicists provided the material for the propaganda. However, the Third Reich was a lot less unanimous than is often assumed. Power groups developed contradictory visions and put up an ideological fight. The Third Reich has therefore sometimes been compared to a feudal power structure with feuding vassals.

RACIALLY IMPURE CHRISTIAN
‘SLAUGHTERER OF THE SAXONS’

At first Charlemagne was not in favour with the most important National Socialist ideologists. In Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts (1934) Alfred Rosenberg doubted if Charlemagne had pure Germanic blood. Moreover, he had entered into a treaty with Christendom, which Rosenberg hated, and he had massacred the racially pure Saxons of Widukind because they did not want to be converted. The image of the ‘slaughterer of the Saxons’ was widely circulated in early Nazi propaganda. Widukind was represented as a true revolutionary who fought for the freedom of his people. Nor was Heinrich Himmler, the powerful chief of the SS and the German police, a fan of Charlemagne. He too considered the conversion of the Teutons to Christianity to be a primal sin and held Charlemagne responsible. He even qualified Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious as ‘Jewish-like’. Himmler made a real effort to propagate the Saxon duke Henry the Lion and the founder of the Ottonian dynasty
by the atrocious Christian conversion zeal", the so-called 'Sachsenhain' near Verden.

In all this Himmler was greatly influenced by Karl Maria Wiligut, an adherent of a Teutonic-occultist sect, whom he appointed as head of prehistoric research within the SS. The Reichsführer of the SS was personally strongly involved in the development of a Teutonic cult which he also considered to be the core of Nazi ideology.

Hitler was not really enthusiastic about the Teutonic cult promoted by Himmler and his acolytes. He seldom referred to it in public and in private conversation he indicated that he thought it was utter nonsense. Hitler rather admired classical antiquity, especially strong leader figures and generals such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon. Also Charlemagne was such a figure.

In his notorious 'table conversations', in which he delivered long monologues (preferably about art and history) for a circle of confidants during the war, he called Charlemagne one of the greatest figures in world history because he had unified the German tribes.

Henry I as the forefathers of the Third Reich. He also saw them as the founders of the imperialist German Ostpolitik. In 1935 he founded, together with Walther Darré, the most important 'Blut und Boden' ideologist of the Third Reich, an organization that would promote the ancestral heritage and investigate Teutonic history. This 'SS-Ahnenerbe' developed a cult around the two Henrys. Himmler ordered the restoration of the Wewelsburg near Paderborn, which he attributed to Henry I, and he built a memorial to the 'Saxons who were butchered

UNIFIER OF THE REALM

In a speech at the Reichspartei rally of 1935 Hitler already praised Charlemagne as the man who had unified the empire and he declared that Christianity had boosted the formation of the realm. Thus he explicitly condemned the attacks on Charlemagne and implicitly glossed over the submission of the Saxons. Hitler's vassals understood the signal. In the official SS journal Himmler immediately had an article published explaining that the submission
of the Saxons by Charlemagne had to be seen as an expression of Teutonic will power. All references to the slaughterer of the Saxons were henceforth forbidden and 'Sachsenhain' was not further developed as a cult. Charlemagne had to be recognized as a necessary centralizing power factor. This reflected Hitler's changed position: he was no longer the leader of an opposition party, but the German head of state who did not tolerate any opposition, not even by his own supporters, as the SA leaders had experienced in the 'Night of the Long Knives'. Rebels such as Widukind and Henry the Lion, who had turned against their respective emperors Charlemagne and Frederick I Barbarossa, did not fit into Hitler's preferred historical concept. Propaganda leader Joseph Goebbels excelled in translating this idea into new images. In a speech for his members of staff he stated that Charlemagne was the creator of the German Reich idea. He was the man with a mission everyone and everything had to give way to. A textbook about Charlemagne (1943) at the Adolf Hitler schools where the elite of Nazi youth was trained, explained that the juncture at which the Germans lived made Charlemagne topical again. Widukind could not be forgotten, but this did not rule out a tribute to the greatest German emperor ever:

“We respectfully bow our heads to Widukind, the brave duke of the Saxons, fighter for honour and freedom, and to Charlemagne, the greatest emperor of the Teutons.”

**BARBAROSSA AND CHARLEMAGNE**

“History must always be understood within the context of its time. Who can guarantee that after 1000 years – when the Reich has to direct its policy to the South again, for whatever reason – some foolish secondary school teacher will not declare: 'What Hitler did in the East was indeed meant well,
FOR DANMARK!
MOD BOLCHEVISMEN!
but ultimately nonsense, he should have headed South! Maybe such an idiot will go so far as to call him the ‘butcher of the Ostmark’, because, when fetching back German Austria, he put everyone who tried to thwart this enterprise against the wall. Without violence the German tribes, with their stubbornness and self-contained behaviour, could never have been brought together, neither at the time of Charlemagne nor in his time."

Said Hitler on 31 March 1942 in one of his aforementioned ‘table conversations’. It is a striking example of how Hitler put himself in a tradition of ruthless rulers.

Not the Saxon duke Henry the Lion who fought the Slavs, but Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa who waged war in Italy was chosen by Hitler personally to lend his name to the military operation that had to bring down the Soviet Union. The war in the east was written in the Nazi stars. After Hitler had defeated the Western European democracies militarily in 1940 and Great Britain was left as the only power without posing an immediate threat he opened the second front. Something fundamentally different was at stake in that war. The rank and file of National Socialism and large sections of the German population believed that it was a crusade against Bolshevism, to save western culture from the Judeo-Bolshevist hordes. For that reason also Frederick Barbarossa, who was one of the initiators of the third crusade in 1189-1190, was a suitable icon. The reality was that it was an imperialist war of conquest. The German-Teutonic Lebensraum was in the east. Poland, Ukraine, Belorussia and the European parts of Russia were predestined to be exploited colonially and to be partly populated by Teutons. The Slav population would, at best, be put into action as a cheap labour reservoir without rights or else be deported or killed. This is what happened to the millions of Jews who lived in Eastern Europe. Himmler and his SS were the most important executors of this Teutonic dream/nightmare. Special SS units operated behind the front lines and liquidated Jewish communities and Bolshevists, a passe-partout for anyone who thwarted the German plans. Within the German army the Waffen-SS divisions operated as storm troops. Several had names referring to the German empire in the Middle Ages: Hohenstaufen, after the Swabian dynasty that produced a number of German kings and emperors; Florian Geyer after a Bavarian nobleman who was involved in the German Peasants’ War in the 16th century; Frundsberg after the Swabian chief of the German Landsknechte, a professional army that offered its services to the emperor.

The Waffen-SS also recruited in the occupied Western European countries that were considered to be Germanic. These Germanic volunteers ended up in units with names referring to the Germanic-Nordic unity: Germany, Wiking, Westland, Nordland. Furthermore anti-Bolshevist legions were established all over occupied Europe. Hitler gave Himmler the right to deploy the legions from the Germanic countries such as Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Flanders in the Waffen-SS. He considered these volunteers to be part of his Teutonic home force with which he would colonize the east. For the Reichsführer-SS it was crucial that they were of Germanic blood. Non-Germanic volunteers had no place in the SS.

But when Operation Barbarossa did not turn out to be a Blitzkrieg victory like in the west, Berlin had to change its tune. Propaganda leader Goebbels immediately understood this. He stylized Hitler into the likeness of Emperor Frederick the Great who fights a heroic battle for his people against mighty enemies whom he defeats after crisis and disaster. The film Der Große König from 1942 served this purpose. Charlemagne could also be used to

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*The Waffen-SS propaganda often referred to the heroic Germanic past. Danish recruitment poster referring to the Vikings.*
visualize the solidarity of a Christian Europe against godless Bolshevism. The circumstances forced even Himmler to abandon his racist illusion of purity. He accepted that non-Germanic and even non-European volunteers were admitted to the Waffen-SS. In September 1944 the SS division Charlemagne was established with French collaborators and volunteers who had fled and who had served in a French anti-Bolshevist legion before. The division was deployed against the advancing Red Army and suffered heavy losses. The last carré of volunteers of the Charlemagne was among the defenders of the Führer bunker in Berlin where Hitler committed suicide on 30 April 1945.

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**Bibliography**


