



## Historicizing National Socialism and Mehmet Genç

### Nasyonal Sosyalizmi Tarihselleştirmek ve Mehmet Genç

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#### ABSTRACT

National Socialism, more than just a political ideology, signifies one of the most convoluted historical events of the twentieth century. The depiction of the Nazi era in post-war historiography emerged as a contentious realm of debate. Distinct interpretative divides crystallized: on one side, the 'Sonderweg' theories asserting Germany's unique modernization journey, and on the other, perspectives anchoring events to the prevailing geopolitical dynamics and broader factors of the period. Germany's assertive strides under National Socialist leadership, especially during the 1930s, amplified the challenges of a nuanced treatment of the topic. In Turkey, amidst a landscape of contending modernization narratives, National Socialism had resonated with those seeking a more culturally attuned renewal. This study aims to scrutinize the Ottoman economic historian Mehmet Genç's evaluation of National Socialism. Genç's engagement with the subject goes beyond mere historical processes and political events, encompassing the philosophical background of National Socialism. The analysis will first delve into Genç's evaluation of National Socialism through the lens of the Sonderweg theses, then explore the foundational philosophical orientations that underpin Genç's academic perspectives and methodologies..

**Keywords:** National socialism, Mehmet Genç, Sonderweg, Wagner, Nietzsche, Hitler

**JEL Classification:** B00, N00, P00

#### ÖZ

Nasyonal Sosyalizm, bir siyasi ideoloji olmanın ötesinde, yirminci yüzyılın en çetrefil tarihi vakalarından birine işaret eder. Nazi tecrübesinin tarihe nasıl kaydedileceği savaş sonrası tarih yazımının en çetin bahislerinden biri olmuştur. Hadiseleri Almanya'nın benzersiz bir modernleşme sürecinden geçtiğini söyleyerek açıklayan 'özel yol' (sonderweg) tezleriyle, olan biteni dönemin cari güç dengeleri ve daha genelleştirilebilir etkenlere bağlayarak izah eden yaklaşımlar arasında ciddi yorum farklılıkları ortaya çıkmıştır. Almanya'nın Nasyonal Sosyalist idare altında sergilediği atılımın etkisiyle özellikle otuzlu yıllarda uyandırdığı olumlu ilgi de konuyu yetkin biçimde işlemeyi zorlaştıran hususlardan biri olmuştur. Nasyonal Sosyalizm, alternatif modernleşme anlayışlarının mücadele içerisinde olduğu Türkiye'de de toplumsal bünyeye uygun daha sahil bir kültürel yenileşme arayanlar arasında merak uyandıran bir



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mesele olmuştur. Bu çalışmada Osmanlı iktisat tarihçisi Mehmet Genç'in nasyonal sosyalizme dair değerlendirmelerinin tahlili amaçlanmaktadır. Genç'in konuyla ilgisi tarihi süreçler ve siyasi hadiselerle sınırlı kalmamış, Nasyonal Sosyalizm'in felsefi hazırlayıcılarını da içeren bir kapsama doğru genişlemiştir. Çalışmada, önce sonderweg tezleri bağlamında Mehmet Genç'in Nasyonal

Sosyalizm üzerine değerlendirmeleri, ardından aynı değerlendirmelere temel oluşturan felsefi yönelimlerin Genç'in ilmi tavır ve yaklaşımlarındaki yeri incelenecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Nasyonal sosyalizm, Mehmet Genç, Sonderweg, Wagner, Nietzsche, Hitler  
**JEL Sınıflaması:** B00, N00, P00

"Loving Wagner, living the *Mahur*. Such was our destiny." *Tanpınar*

## 1. Introduction

Although it is now judged as a counter-model or even a case of pure evil, National Socialism had made a striking impact on the world stage as a social and political option in the first half of the twentieth century. There were those who sought to rationalize National Socialism through philosophical discourse, while others embraced it as a potent blueprint for national progress, primarily driven by practical considerations. In addition to thinkers who glorified National Socialism as a reaction to a new stage in the history of Being (Heidegger, 1959, p. 199)<sup>1</sup>, there were intellectuals who idealized it as a third way between the liberal capitalist West and the authoritarian socialist East (Runciman, 2013, p. 76-110). The ideology drew its inspiration not just from Germany's position within the contemporary balance of power, but also from its commitment to addressing the most critical requirements of nations endeavoring to pursue modernization amid the complexities of various structural and cultural challenges. National Socialism propagated some attractive visions for those seeking a more authentic, indigenous, and organic mode of modernization (Jaraus, 2018). Moreover, some of these appeared to be more than mere visions; they came to be appreciated as proven principles of progress in the case of Germany, a country that was rapidly rising and recovering from its postwar obstacles. This very ideology would go on to influence Turkey, where various models of modernization were contending both in terms of concepts and actions. In Turkish intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger famously spoke of the "inner truth and greatness" of the National Socialist movement.

circles, there were also individuals intrigued by national socialism. To formulate a "national social policy" (*milli içtimai siyaset*) in the face of "the social question" (*sosyal mesele*) in Turkey, it might have been beneficial to examine contemporary Germany (Kansu, 2003). The favorable views towards Hitler could not be regarded, as in Yakup Kadri's ironic remark, as mere "admiration for God's sake" (*fisebilillah hayranlık*); for those who sought for suitable prescriptions for concrete social issues, such sympathies were due to the remarkable progress Germany had made during the 30s.<sup>2</sup> In this study, the aim is to analyze Mehmet Genç's approach to National Socialism, one of the most important Ottoman historians who left his mark in the field with his extraordinary and broad intellectual pursuits. The problem of explaining the rise of National Socialism, which emerged as one of the most controversial and thorny issues in recent historiography, constitutes the broad context of this study. It tries to interpret Genç's interest in the subject as a historian and scholar by relating it to some important historical theses on National Socialism.

## 2. The Problem of Historicizing National Socialism

Mehmet Genç's most explicit and direct assessments of National Socialism appear in his introduction to the translation of Hitler's *Political Testament*. As one might expect, this piece, which Genç penned in 1966 but allegedly willed to be posthumously published by his name, mirrors the sentiment of the period. Genç (2022) starts by talking about a climate of conflict, stating that the conflict does not end even if the war ends, emphasizing that the war now takes place within societies, "in social groups, in the consciousness of individuals". When considering that student movements had commenced in 1966, as of the time this text was written, and had gained significant momentum and explosiveness in '68, it becomes evident that this observation and emphasis on conflict signify the tumultuous events of that era. Conversely, the international setting, which was on the brink of entering the

<sup>2</sup> In his documentary novel *Panorama*, Karaosmanoğlu (2018 [1953]) says, "The number of those who admired Hitler was increasing", and a little later, he has one of his protagonists tell him that the 'new order' of National Socialism is "a will to comprehensive development born out of the restlessness of the masses of the people who are sick and tired of unruly economic systems and unruly forms of administration in almost every country".

phase of the Cold War known as “détente,” would temporarily ease the atmosphere of ideological tension. The political ideological climate had already begun to transform at the very time when Genç was writing his introduction. We cannot be certain of Genç’s thoughts on these issues in the aftermath or how he interpreted the new context. However, it’s evident that the prevailing atmosphere that had inspired the piece had, to some degree, evolved and changed. More importantly, however, some crucial debates and transformations were well under way especially in the historiography of National Socialism.

How to narrativize the Nazi experience, how to register National Socialism in history, has been one of the most difficult questions of post-war historiography. The deepening conflicts of historical interpretation regarding National Socialism came in waves, each time gaining new dimensions in accord with the political priorities of the era. Historian Enzo Traverso (2019, p. 106-110, 2013, p. 100-119) known for his important work on the public use of history and the politics of memory, for example, suggests that we can distinguish between five waves of debate. While some of these debates stem from methodological concerns, others are more directly anchored in contemporary social and political issues and have wider public implications, addressing the German and the wider European context under transformation. It often turns out to be an assessment of the German present, a debate aimed at constructing the political consciousness of the present, rather than an enquiry into the actualities of the Nazi history. When the same file was reopened after the German unification in the nineties, for instance, the subject came to be a matter of reconciling with the past and restoring identity in the context of the integration problems of the country at the time. Both the endeavor to historicize National Socialism and the imperative of memory-building on it, i.e., truthfully objectifying it as a historical topic (in Genç’s terms “achieving objectivity”) while at the same time properly recording it in memory as an exemplary case of human tragedy and moral failure, have been pivotal to the debates of the past half-century.

Since Genç’s text precedes most of these debates, he could not have had the opportunity to engage in an intellectual exchange with these methodological or

normative concerns while developing his interpretations of National Socialism here. Nonetheless, there are intriguing aspects in his arguments that can be compared with certain lines of research on National Socialism. In its basic thrust, the text seems to be closer to the exceptionalist approach evaluating National Socialism as an entirely different, almost unique case rather than reading it either in terms of the leftwing theories of fascism or the liberal interpretations of totalitarianism. Genç contends that although the “opposing forces” of the century, namely, capitalism and Marxism, are “united in strangling their rivals by identifying them under the names of Fascism and Nazism”, the latter are in fact “travelers of the third way” who are pursuing “some kind of reconciliation”. Such an interpretation would bring him very close to a form of the famous *Sonderweg* thesis, which states that Germany followed a peculiar direction in its quest for modernization and therefore ended up in National Socialism.

### **3. German Exceptionalism or the Possibility of Unique Modernization**

Many have wondered how Germany, after periods of great progress, could descend into the horrors of the 1930s. Why was this country unable to escape the challenges of the new age despite all its achievements? Why did it turn into a whirlpool when it was being praised as a pole star? A significant part of the answers to these questions clustered around a thesis called *Sonderweg* (special path). According to this thesis, Germany was dragged into a dead end because it followed a unique, special, or original path to modernization, and when it could not resolve the internal contradictions of this path, it became the scene of a catastrophe. Despite all the impressive developments in the German basin, the country could not resist succumbing to a flawed and even self-defeating form of modernization. Although the modes of production had improved, new social classes had not succeeded in replacing the old elites. The bourgeoisie had emerged, but it displayed a chronic incapacity to assume political responsibility. Historians even speculated about the feudalization of the bourgeoisie in Germany. Civil society developed, but it could not overcome the military domination of the status quo actors like the famous Junker network, especially in the case of Prussia (Eley, 2018). Parliamentary representation was in a continuous struggle for

survival, and liberal democracy remained no more than a fragile enterprise. Even if new social forces emerged in modernizing Germany, they were unable to replace the established power elites. The Weimar Republic would ultimately crumble under the authoritarian structures that had been breeding for centuries.

While this mode of explanation, at times leaning towards more essentialist arguments by associating the issue with the entire German mindset, fostered a stereotypical understanding of the subject, it also faced a multitude of criticisms. These critiques emerged as more parties engaged with the question, generations evolved, and research methods grew more refined. The first objections came from revisionist authors with conservative (or liberal conservative) leanings who complained that the thesis of the special path to Nazism had begun to create for Germany the complex of a "past that did not pass". Indexing an entire history to a specific era (1933-45) and turning it into a focus of negative identification for the nation had left almost no positive historical references for the German self-conception and had transformed German self-confidence into German self-doubt. Germans should not have accepted being a stigmatized nation and should have been able to draw inspiration from the untainted sources of the "other Germany" whose place in history was clear. The second line of criticism is based on methodological skepticism about the procedures of historical comparison that agrees to isolate a particular historicity and call it a "special path". To speak of a special path would understandably imply the assumption of a standard or normal path, where the criteria are almost always drawn from the British, the American or the French cases. It was because the German world deviated from their examples, which paved the true path of modernity, that it sunk into the Nazi catastrophe. However, such criteria usually preclude the explanation of things with their own dynamics and sideline alternative grounds of comparison. The (Western) Eurocentric view of a normal path can be misleading not only when applied in non-European contexts but even in the context of Europe that includes several different national heritages. Taking the Nazi era as an axis, projecting National Socialism backwards by looking at it through what some historians call an inverted optics, and narrating the entire past as but a prologue to Nazism will obscure or distort the processes that need to be studied within their own historical

specificities. In a third cluster, extending upon this line of criticism, we encounter endeavors to assess the credibility of the thesis across different domains. The empirical foundations of the special path thesis are questioned by multifaceted studies focusing on the scale of bourgeois development, the depth of civil society, and the diversity of social reactions and the initial orientations (with unintended consequences) of different subgroups in the face of National Socialism in Germany (Kocka, 1988; Everett, 2015; Blackbourn and Eley, 1984; Kocka, 2010).

While all these criticisms highlight the flaws in the *Sonderweg* thesis and, to some extent, write it off as a readily available, almost mechanical explanation, they haven't resulted in its complete abandonment. On the contrary, there are serious supporters of the thesis who believe that it can be salvaged despite all dissatisfactions. Some of them believe that the idea of a special path leading to National Socialism is essential for Germany to stay on its democratic course. In a sense, this dark past provides an anchor for democratic political imagination and memory. For example, according to Jürgen Habermas (2001), who opposed revisionist readings of history during the famous "historians' debate" (*Historikerstreit*) of the 80s, it was this memory that made "adherence to universalist constitutional principles" possible in Germany. The historian should not be an uncritical guardian of the national heritage, but one who can lead critical dialogues on the past in the name of a well-deserved self-confidence for the future.<sup>3</sup> Those who still recognize the thesis as valid in this fashion argue that until an alternative and equivalent model or narrative of historical continuity is established, the special path explanation will remain effective. In the end, as Jürgen Kocka (2018) makes clear, the special path thesis has not been falsified, but has become relativized and less important, despite getting more nuanced.

It was already mentioned that Genç's views on the German experience and National Socialism seem comparable to a variant of this approach. Admittedly,

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<sup>3</sup> The issue has once again come to the fore today. The political climate and the need for a new geopolitical positioning in Europe in general and in Germany in particular that have emerged with Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a relapse of historical sensitivities. For an article by Habermas, in which he deals with the issue by foregrounding German memory and identity again, and which has sparked serious debates, see Habermas (2022). For a good review of Habermas's piece, see Tooze (2022).

this judgement may sound quite strange at first glance, since we do not hear much of the negative and critical tone that dominates the *Sonderweg* thesis in his evaluations. There is nothing to suggest that he regards the German way as a deviation, a departure from the standard course. But this is because his standpoint corresponds more to the positive interpretation of the *Sonderweg* of an earlier generation of historians, with roots going back to the 19th century. Genç's account essentially reflects the long-abandoned positive version of this thesis (positive *Sonderweg*), whose negative version (negative *Sonderweg*) would also be questioned to a great extent from the 70s onwards.

Indeed, the first form of the thesis was based more on a German success story (positive *Sonderweg*) (Everett, 2015; Olsen, 2012, p. 15, 246-249; Kolasi, 2020). In the 1830s, Heinrich Heine (2007, p. 116-117) had already expressed it in a series of uncanny prophecies: "... But it will come and when you hear crashing, as it has never crashed before in all of world history, you will know, German thunder has finally reached its goal ... A play will be enacted in Germany which will make the French Revolution look like a harmless idyll ... And the hour will come. As on the rows of an amphitheater, nations will gather around Germany to see the great games of battle." For a country that had not yet achieved its political unity, these were liable to be seen as ambitious wishes. As a matter of fact, about a decade later, another poet expressed the country's lack of direction by stating that "Germany is Hamlet". However, in the 1870s, when Germany had already united and recovered, the situation would once again be described through the same Shakespearean character: "Germany is not Hamlet." (Again, in the 1940s, it was emphasized that the German artist was not Hamlet either. With the Führer, the poet was no longer a tragic figure) (Höfele, 2016; Dobson, 2009; Vonberg, 2015).

At the end of the 19th century, when this self-confidence transformed from poetic prophecy to historian's interpretation, it formed the basis for explanations that Germany had achieved its longed-for greatness through a unique path. From Leopold von Ranke onwards, several historians attributed the experience of ascendancy, which was characterized by a particularly strong state tradition, to a uniquely German spirit. Germany had discovered its potentials thanks to astute



statesmen like Bismarck, the ideal of *Bildung* as a conception of human excellence, a university model based on this conception, and a culture positioned against a materialistic civilization (the West, particularly France), on the one hand, and an authoritative state positioned against an autocratic East (Russia), on the other. Friedrich Meinecke, a prominent figure in German historiography, once portrayed Germany as a unique blend of culture and power. This country of *kultur* was now getting able to assert itself against civilization and take its rightful place on the stage of history.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, Meinecke abandoned the element of power in this combination, but continued to emphasize the part of culture. He desired Goethe reading groups to be organized across the country and hoped that Germany would be rehabilitated and revitalized as a nation of culture. In a way, he foresaw the remedy in the form of a collective educational and cultural mobilization following the devastation. He imagined a country where people gathered every Sunday to read Goethe, Schiller and Hölderlin, while listening to classical music (Forner, 2014, p. 120; Gay, 2023, p. 92-93, 122-125). Meinecke did not view the catastrophe that had befallen the country as a product of a uniquely German ailment or flaw, but rather as one of the consequences of the broader European modernization and civilization process. He thus believed that the Germans had their own home-grown resources to revive as a culture-nation.

Mehmet Genç's interpretation seems comparable to that of Meinecke, who adopted this earlier and more positive form of the special path thesis, although he later partially modified it. In his discussion of the German adventure, Genç resorts to a similar equation of "culture and power": "It is the eruption of a culture that has created the greatest of all that has been done in the name of Western Civilization since the beginning of the 19th century, the Germanic culture, with which no other culture can compete in the field of human achievements from philosophy to music, in its claim to political power." This eruption would certainly spark a war. In fact, the First World War had broken out because of "German

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to Elias (2023, p. 163), "in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the concept of 'culture' came to mean more and more 'national culture', its old humanist and moral 'connotations' were pushed into the background and eventually disappeared altogether."

hunger and British stinginess". But in the first war, "instead of being satiated, Germany lost what it already had." This first great loss would not stop "the most dynamic and great nation in Europe". "In the end, the gap between its potential power and what it was able to obtain would become a catalyst for a desire for more than it deserved". It was surrounded by "states which, in spite of - or because of - their pragmatic and simple culture, divided the world". In his view, then, the German experience had taken its place in the silhouette of the age not because it was stuck in its pre-modern, unrenewed historical legacies by negatively diverging from the 'normal' line of modernization (negative *Sonderweg*). Instead, it was progressing towards a political stature and identity that matched its competence in various other domains. It demanded a political existence worthy of its superior culture. While becoming a giant in culture, it could not remain a dwarf in power. The story's conclusion, however, depicted a nation that displayed greatness in every domain, yet its pursuit of political might spiraled out of control. In a sense, Germany had been defeated by its own achievements, a judgment that can be seen as a reflection in Genç's historical approach of the tragic sentiment that permeated his spirit and suited him so well (and endeared Nietzsche and Unamuno to him), despite his always cheerful demeanor.<sup>5</sup>

Germany had experienced both victory and defeat, but in Genç's words, "one more thing was necessary for all these 'musts' to come into being. This was Adolf Hitler, and he came."

#### **4. Beyond Hitler-centric Readings**

One of the ideas circulating in Germany in the late 1920s was that a führer was needed to "save culture" or, in Koselleck's words, "to save *Bildung*", which was in crisis after the war (1918) (Koselleck, 2009, p. 155). In a society crushed first by war and then by economic depression, it is not surprising to find a call for a savior like how Machiavelli does in the last part of *The Prince* – recovery requires

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<sup>5</sup> Surely, having a tragic intuition does not mean being committed to a tragic worldview, to tragedy as a worldview, or, as Jaspers (1952) puts it, to a kind of "pan-tragedy".

*f hrerbildung*. The expected leadership is sometimes described as follows: "The true *F hrer* must reflect the diabolical vitality of the spiritual forces that characterize the age" (Koselleck, 2009, p. 155). But it only took a generation or two for the whole mentality to dissolve. Germany's defeat was to be an experience that would undermine the *F hrer* principle and all the associated conceptions of leadership. In the post-1945 German consciousness, Hitler could only be an anti-hero, a counter-model. Consequently, one common approach to examining the Sonderweg has often involved exploring the personality traits within German society that gave rise to Hitler.

The depiction of Hitler in historiographical studies over the last half century markedly contrasts with the one presented by Gen. Hitler now appears as a smart but narrow-minded ball of arrogance, with mediocre interests, making wrong decisions and insisting on them, avoiding controversial and error-prone issues, especially by postponing domestic political decisions, and thus sculpting his own statue by trying to perpetuate a crystal image of infallibility. Undoubtedly, when it comes to Hitler, ideological and emotional cleavages are so strong that there may be no limit to criticism, and, as Gen says, it may at one point lead to the impasse of praising the victor and beating the vanquished. Hence, in-depth studies like those found in the seminal works of historian Ian Kershaw tend to place less emphasis on hyperbolic personality analyses. Instead, they concentrate on elucidating Hitler's actual influence within the Nazi state's power structure, his role in the practical operation of the governing machinery, and the fundamental question of whether power was primarily monocratic or polycratic. Of course, such a story cannot be told without considering the personality and worldview (*weltanschauung*) of the anti-hero. Nevertheless, substantive attempts to historicize National Socialism try to avoid the mistake of "over-personalizing complex issues" and "reducing them to Hitler's personality and ideology" (Kershaw, 2015).

So, how to read Mehmet Gen's descriptions attributing a depth, perhaps a dark depth, to Hitler? What should we make of his references to Hitler as "this dark genius", "this evil genius", or this "abyssal genius"? One can argue that,

according to Genç's perspective, we cannot comprehensively analyze individuals like Hitler solely by labeling them as evil. To categorize such phenomena merely as embodiments of evil would be an oversimplified and insufficient way to comprehend them. These are individuals whose character is susceptible to a broad spectrum of emotions and their success (!) partly comes from their disposition to emotional oscillation. They might cry where most would not, get excited about an event that is not a source of enthusiasm for others, or get aroused by an experience that would not inspire anything in others. Such might indeed be the inner world of most statesmen and leaders in the highest echelons of powers whom we dislike. The legacy of some, who are commonly associated with evil, could even be seen as presenting more appropriate themes for a discussion on theodicy: political theodicy. They cause untold suffering, march to power at the cost of countless lives, and some of them manage to rule societies for decades. They provide more substantial material for an investigation regarding divine justice than most conventional topics within the field. Nevertheless, in most cases it would be inaccurate simply to assert that what motivates these personalities is pure evil. A one-dimensional malevolence is not enough to tell their stories. Yesterday and today, this has always been one of the basic simplifications one can fall into when evaluating such figures of power. This is the opposite pole of the enchanting, hagiographic readings that idolize and treat them as mortal gods. Either way, flesh and blood humans are portrayed in an augmented reality, whether under a negative or positive light. Mehmet Genç may have had these intuitions in mind when he talked about the "multi-dimensional, dark and complex spirit of Adolf Hitler". He does not want to make the mistake of turning a real figure into a straw man. He appears reluctant to do so, but in the process, it seems that he extends beyond the previously mentioned perspective and assumes a framing that might raise concerns. This framing involves portraying Hitler with all the positive attributes of the German people, aligning him with the great figures in German history, and even suggesting him as a successor to them. Thus, Hitler becomes not only power but also culture, or the fusion of culture and power in a German body, the expected *führerbildung*. For instance, could there be a hint of irony in his description of Hitler as an "artist"? Could this be an allusion to a person who aestheticizes violence? It is not easy to judge. "He was a painter

and his interest in painting was ... definite and intense." "He was a master of architecture, this art of the mind challenging matter." "We are only now learning that he wrote poems and stories." In music, "in this magical art of sound, he found himself full and complete", but there, recognizing the limit called Wagner, "he was content to remain a listener". "After Richard Wagner, music could no longer be made or written, but only listened to and understood." Hitler was "such a Führer as to align all the German giants along the same line of character, as if they had not prepared him, but he had plunged them backwards into the past as fragments of the German romanticism which had culminated and exploded in him".

The discourse here occasionally appears to fall into what is now criticized as being overly Hitler-centric, as evidenced by sweeping statements like "from Luther to Hitler". By foregrounding Hitler, described by Mehmet Genç as a "foggy and crazy mystic", there's a risk of reducing an entire cultural bloom to this mere imitator of *Rienzi*, this would-be *Parsifal*. In this introduction to the translation of Hitler's *Political Testament*, he may have wanted to dwell more on the Führer himself. However, the authenticity of the testament itself is also regarded as highly questionable today.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Aesthetico-philosophical Paths to National Socialism: Wagner and Nietzsche

National Socialism is often characterized as a mythology or even as a "political religion". Conversely, some argue that the Holocaust has evolved into a form of civil religion today (Traverso, 2016, p. 123-137). Mehmet Genç also describes National Socialism not as a regime or ideology but as "a style, a psychology, a mythology". It can be suggested that this description bears traces of Genç's interest in Wagner and Nietzsche, an interest which is much spoken about but not

<sup>6</sup> The authenticity of the testament published by Trevor-Roper, which Mehmet Genç refers to and which forms the basis for the translation, has not been confirmed despite the passage of decades. Even if the text reflects the overall atmosphere of Hitler's circle and the manner of thinking prevailing there, the claim that it was dictated by Hitler himself and the subsequent chain of transmission has not been verified. In the Ottoman-Turkish context, the issue is somewhat reminiscent of the case of *Sultan Abdülhamid's Memoirs*. For a recent and comprehensive study on the subject, see Nilsson (2019).

explained a lot. Constructing a new mythology, originating believable myths, was the true dream stimulating this aesthetico-philosophical initiative – to establish a new public religion on “total art”, to realize a kind of transubstantiation through art, and to create a new and *überhumanity*...

Nietzsche had once served as a fount of inspiration for conservative thought, more warmly embraced by the right than the left. To the left, he epitomized right-wing extremism, with Georg Lukacs (2006, p. 303-394), for instance, discerning in Nietzsche the genesis of a trend towards irrationality. Today, although diverse factions of the left unearth useful insights in his works, Nietzsche's elitist tendencies remain a polar opposite. Efforts to render Nietzsche conducive to democratic thought endure, yet his ideas, susceptible to aristocratic interpretations, easily garner influential adherents (Drochon, 2016, p. 71-75; Beiner, 2018). While Genç's Nietzsche aligns more with the right's interpretation than that of the left, it's not quite accurate to say that he predominantly extracts conservative tendencies from Nietzsche. Viewing him in juxtaposition with Wagner, Nietzsche emerges as a figure resisting the erosion of thought's musicality, or the stripping of melody from ideas. For Nietzsche, music provided cognitive avenues allowing the mind to delve into the otherwise inaccessible abysses (Strong, 2012, p. 57-90). Genç (2000, p. 31) echoed this sentiment, often noting that when faced with an insurmountable problem in his studies, turning to Wagner's compositions would guide him to a resolution. Just like Nietzsche's musical approach to philosophy and philology, Genç endeavored to perceive history through the lens of musical subtleties (Safranski, 2002, p. 59). Wagner's music not only helped to clarify the difficulties he encountered in his research practice, but also provided him with a structural archetype, a kind of pattern for understanding Ottoman customs and institutions. He believed, like the elusive beginnings and endings in Wagner's compositions, the Ottoman empire had intricate structuring processes that made it difficult to capture how institutions begin and end.<sup>7</sup> Genç also articulated his lifelong connection with

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<sup>7</sup> I suppose *Tristan und Isolde* is Wagner's most relevant opera in view of Genç's description here. The opera begins with the Tristan chord, which would become one of the most famous chords in the history of music, but it does not move according to the traditional rules of tonal harmony, it does not proceed towards a harmonic resolution, and it transitions to a new chord, all in all evoking a sense of endlessness. I think when he made this comparison with the Ottomans, he had specifically *Tristan* in mind. For Genç's quote, see Böhürler (2023).

Ottoman history drawing upon Nietzsche's metaphor of the abyss: "Nietzsche says that if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. I peered into the Ottoman abyss, and it peered into me. Consequently, we almost fused."<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the attempts to account for Genç's interest in or admiration for Wagner and Nietzsche can be divided into three clusters. Firstly, some seem to use it only to demonstrate the broad and high cultural interests of a master historian. Secondly, there are those who think that we can trace here the philosophical seeds of a statist-nationalist-voluntarist orientation. According to a third approach, Wagner and Nietzsche's critique of economics and capitalism constitutes the main motive behind the interest Genç as an economic historian had in the duo (Özel, 2021; Çakır, 2021; Ayvazoğlu, 2022; Küçükcalay, 2022). Nonetheless, a fourth dimension, equally significant, must be introduced into these narratives, each of which offers varying degrees of explanatory power: Mehmet Genç drew his metaphysical consolations, to a significant extent, from the affective-cognitive templates of Wagner-Nietzsche line of thought.<sup>9</sup> How we conceive life, to use a technical word, how we ontologize it, is the key to many of our attitudes. Speaking of life or existence as an abyss is full of metaphysical implications. To suppose that we go on and on and finally arrive at an abyss has a nihilistic ring to it. But if you

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Regarding Genç's passion for Wagner's music, see Ayvazoğlu (2022, p. 78-84) and Ayyıldız (2022, p. 85-88). On Wagner and the Tristan chord, see Ekren (2016, p. 130-32).

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche's (2002[1886], p. 69) famous aphorism goes like this: "And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you."

<sup>9</sup> In his comprehensive biography of Mehmet Genç, Beşir Ayvazoğlu (2022, p. 71-72, 82-83), referring to Tanpınar's statement, which we also include in the epigraph, says that Mehmet Genç "had begun to listen to and live Wagner before he lived *Mahur Beste*, and this is a phenomenon we have no other example of". This is true in the sense of the philosophico-musical climate where Genç had wanted to penetrate and perhaps lose himself. For three reasons, however, one can still argue, just as Tanpınar expressed, that he loved Wagner and lived the *Mahur*. First, in terms of his practical life context, Mehmet Genç lived here, that is, in the climate of *Mahur Beste*. Whatever Wagner is and whatever he represents, Genç lived where it did not circulate at all. Secondly, although he was metaphysically interested in the abyss and admired those who could gaze into it, he could not go much further in that direction either. It is hard to determine if it would have been otherwise if our historian, who was once called 'Nietzsche Mehmet', had continued in philosophy. I don't think we know of anyone exemplifying what it means to gaze into the abyss in this country. This might be considered in relation to Şerif Mardin's famous observation, to which Ayvazoğlu also refers, regarding the absence of the demonic attitude in Turkish thought. The third is related to the peculiarity of the *Mahur* composition or the *Mahur* makam in that in its melodic progression it follows a descending sequence. Similarly, intricate issues of Turkish society and politics recurrently tend to generate such descending courses or trajectories in life. Throughout his life, Mehmet Genç also witnessed many such trajectories. Accordingly, even though he embodied a kind of Turkism in orientation, he had many allusions about Turkey and Turks that sometimes looked like a witty cynicism.

mold it with an idea of majesty, of the sublime, it can also lead to a sort of fideism. Genç's inclination towards the abyssal cannot be deemed as an indiscriminate tendency, a desire to embellish knowledge or a merely aesthetic gesture.

Another noteworthy point here is that Genç's writing on National Socialism contains a tone of voice, an emotional prism that we do not frequently encounter in his mature writings. In his later and more well-known works, we consistently see the historian expressing himself with analytical caution, employing a measured discourse. In this text, on the other hand, one notices a certain amount of enthusiasm, some exuberance. Perhaps, there was something in his soul that was susceptible to what Nietzsche (1980[1874]) called "monumental history" in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. In this regard, his resemblance to Ernst Kantorowicz is notable. Kantorowicz stirred the historical community with his initial work, *Frederick II* (1927), a book even Hitler claimed to have read twice. This Jewish German nationalist, formerly a regular in poet Stefan George's circle, adopted an epic narrative style devoid of footnotes. Fast forward thirty years, his now classic work *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) emerged in a vastly altered milieu where notions of Germanness and nationalism had waned. Delving into a significant facet of political theology, this work exhibited a marked evolution in linguistic detachment, rigorous source utilization, and analytical acumen (Höfele, 2016, p. 91-94; Gay, 2023, p. 71-73). Mehmet Genç consistently exhibited a distinct care in both his scholarship and lifestyle—a hallmark we might describe as characteristically his. Yet beneath this measured exterior, a trace of ecstasy lingered. He harbored a fascination for the abysses and those daring enough to gaze into them, concealing metaphysical passions beneath the historian's prudence. Genç embodied a blend of *rind* and *zahid*, or, drawing upon a Nietzschean contrast, he epitomized a union of *Dionysus* and *Apollo*.

## 6. Conclusion

Examining certain personalities' perspectives on National Socialism can provide insightful and yet unexplored avenues for comprehending specific trajectories and facets of our intellectual history. The forms and extent of National Socialism's impact



continue to be an expanding and dynamic field of research. There is even a contention among some that, had Nazism not been antisemitic, it might have found support even within some Jewish circles and groups. Mehmet Genç's ongoing interest in this subject was not a hidden or unknown aspect of his intellectual itinerary. The point is to probe the layered motivations underpinning this interest and the alterations it underwent. As proposed in this article, analyzing Genç's assessments of National Socialism in relation to the *Sonderweg* debates could provide a rich framework for addressing some of our persistent issues in Turkey. This distinctive historian, devoted to deciphering the multifaceted processes underlying the rise of a vast empire and its evolution into modernity, employed tools and resources ranging from conventional methods of historiography to unusual musical intuitions. In dealing with the case of National Socialism, he sought explanatory insights into the dilemmas associated with the projects of national modernization. It is highly probable that he was not able to engage at length with the developments in the historiography of National Socialism that advanced and diversified over the past half century, that is, long after he was particularly interested in the subject. However, it is not hard to read his understanding of the German path to modernity in connection with the literature on the thesis of a positive *Sonderweg*. In this context, although his piece on National socialism belongs to his early legacy, or the early Mehmet Genç, the question over whether Turkey has followed, will follow, or should follow a unique path seem to have occupied him throughout his life – a question still worth pondering today.

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