

**Michael Jonas**

## **Review**

**Malinowski, Stephan, *Vom König zum Führer. Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat*, Akademie-Verlag: Berlin 2003, 660 p.**

The social history of the German nobility has so far been largely neglected and may never attract similar attention as its correspondent, *Bürgertumsforschung*. Nevertheless, since the 1990s important contributions have been made and structures for *Adelsforschung* are gradually emerging. Probably the most developed centre of this recent interest in *Adelsforschung* in Germany is a prolific group of historians around Heinz Reif at Berlin's *Technical University*. With Stephan Malinowski's weighty but nonetheless comprehensive and impressively accomplished thesis, *Vom König zum Führer*, the fourth volume in a series of studies (*Elitenwandel in der Moderne*) has been published that will certainly further expand the scope of research into the German nobility.

Malinowski's main focus rests with the economic, social and cultural proclivities of the German nobility as well as its political attitudes and affiliations from the late Empire to the *Third Reich*. The author has exploited an abundance of source material from more than thirty public and numerous private archives, of which at least two have hitherto not been considered. Additionally, a rather original approach to the reading of autobiographical sources complements the source basis. Along with his close collaborator Marcus Funck, Malinowski dismisses the established bias applied to this genre, traditionally 'treated as a minefield to be avoided by all but the most experienced veterans' (Kenneth D. Barkin). Autobiographies are, in Malinowski's methodical approach, not seen through the fact/fiction, true/false dichotomy but rather as windows on the perception of reality by their authors. The systematic analysis of style and structure, of content and referential framework of more than 160 aristocratic autobiographies enables Malinowski to deduce the habitual and cultural fibre of the German noble elites (*Adelshabitus* resp. *-kultur*, Malinowski's *Adeligkeit*) and construe their *cultural code(s)* (Shulamit Volkov).

The theoretical basis of Malinowski's study is founded upon the hypothesis of a strong nexus between the economic and social decline of the German aristocracy, especially after 1918, and

political radicalisation. The author reasonably limits his research object to the *old nobility*, those families ennobled prior to 1800. He further divides the noble families of Germany, an estimated 80,000 individuals in the 1920s (approximately 0,15 percent of the overall population), into three different types: the *Grandseigneurs*, principally large-scale landowners whose property permitted a lifestyle befitting their social status, the *Kleinadel*, by far the largest group and primarily composed of lesser nobility, and the so-called *Adelsproletariat*, or noble proletariat, a term Malinowski borrows from contemporary sources denoting the drastically increasing layer of economically impoverished nobility.

Other criteria of differentiation employed by Malinowski are the regional and confessional complexity within the German nobility, the variable professional and generational dispositions, as well as gender, the latter mostly limited to a close to psychohistorical study of *manliness*. In its most basic intention Malinowski's work seeks to provide an analysis of what the author refers to as the *adlige Wertehimmel*, the canon of culture, habitus, and mentality that characterised the German nobility of the decades before and after 1918. Malinowski owes a debt to more recent developments in *Bürgertumsforschung*, which is most evident in the adaptation and utilisation of its conceptual toolbox. His reflections on the conceptual and definitional implications of his research, centred on the apt coinage of *Adeligkeit*, are nonetheless exceptional.

In his introduction, Malinowski discusses the basic elements of this *Adeligkeit*. This discussion is, despite its comparative brevity, the analytical underpinning on which Malinowski draws frequently, if less explicitly, in his argumentation. The origins and formation of the nobility's cultural, habitual and ideological disposition can in many ways be traced back to the features construed here. Malinowski depicts the nobility as historical *experts of visibility* (Heinz Reif) and adherents to a uniquely complex notion of family as the sole quantity of aristocratic life. This notion encompassed both the inner and outer community, i.e. the actual family, exceptionally large as it regularly was, and the social class as a whole. The idea of this close to tribal belonging was perpetuated by specifically aristocratic and effectively un-bourgeois patterns of upbringing and education. It was further promoted by a refined utilisation of autobiographical and genealogical memory whose purpose was to solidify the nobility as an exclusive stratum of society. With it went a variety of habitual and not (yet) ideological features of superiority and leadership. The familiar residues of 19<sup>th</sup>-c. conservatism lingered on, albeit in somewhat elitist variants.

It was primarily within the *Kleinadel* in the years prior to the First World War where these features gradually diffused from the habitual and cultural into the ideological sphere. Traditional elitism converted into a profoundly anti-bourgeois (and hence increasingly anti-Semitic) belief in one's own *Führertum*. Political structures and strategies came into being or were being radicalised. The collapse of 1918, the brutalising experiences of the war and *Freikorps*, in which German aristocrats overproportionally participated, escalated this process. The emotional turmoil of the immediate post-war period additionally lowered the traditional inhibitions upheld by the nobility's exclusive self-image. The main bodies of aristocratic self-organisation, especially the *Kleinadel*-dominated *Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft* (DAG) was the by far largest of its kind and swiftly gravitated toward the German *New Right* (*Neue Rechte*), a terminological umbrella Malinowski prefers to concepts such as *Conservative Revolution* [p. 295 ff]. Malinowski illustrates this process with particular clarity by tracing the evolution of the DAG's aggressive anti-Semitism from a *fin-de-siècle* anti-Judaism, rooted in economic and cultural prejudices, to the radical-*völkische* anti-Semitism of the 1920s. The introduction of *Arierparagraphen* in a number of organisations stipulating the exclusion of *racially impure* members is but one example for the climate in which the aristocratic lobby operated. Malinowski's emphasis on this challenges a recent tendency in German historiography to relativise the significance of the nobility's anti-Semitic attitudes and political role within the *völkische Bewegung*. His apt dictum of the 'völkische destruction of the concept of nobility' [p. 336, 344] depicts the extent to which the German aristocratic elites had not only been infected but entirely transformed by the dominant biological-racial discourse of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

The study furthermore establishes a correlation between the radicalisation of aristocratic anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitic criticism frequently heaved at the German nobility by the *völkische* movement itself. Hitler's diagnosis of the aristocratic elites as a racially degenerated and *mammonisierter Unadel* is, along with Heinrich Claß' *Wenn ich der Kaiser wär* (1912), the probably most apparent example for this attitude. Ideological pressure from the *völkische* mainstream and the anti-Semitism of the politically organised nobility were, according to Malinowski, 'interconnected traditions that continuously radicalised each other' [S. 170].

Another feature of the aristocratic, or rather *kleinadelige*, discourse of the 1920s was built around the supposed dawn of a *new* nobility, only its interpretation remained contested. *Völkische* hardliner within the nobility argued in favour of a total sacking of the old, somewhat contaminated elites and thus found themselves in the company of Darré's and later Himmler's elitist visions of a *Blut und Boden*-grown *Neuadel*, the SS. Contrary to that, ostensibly moderate

voices advocated a revitalised, but nonetheless *old* aristocracy as the new *Führertum*, with merit as the chief criterion of selection. These debates of the 1920s and early 1930s were both constitutive and symptomatic for the self-deception of the German aristocratic elites that they would have a future part to play, particularly in a projected *Third Reich* whose advent seemed inevitable to contemporary conservative thought.

Malinowski's thorough, often brilliant analysis of the affinities between the *völkische Bewegung* (and later on National Socialism) and the political lobby and structures of the German nobility markedly supports Ernst Nolte's early classification of National Socialism as a 'clearly identifiable phenomenon of conservatism' [p. 197].

The author nonetheless does not ignore the complexity of his research object and counterbalances his preliminary conclusions by discussing deviations from the proto-fascist course of development. Highly absorbing is his brief treatment of *adlige 'Renegaten'*, the tiny collection of aristocratic republicans that successfully resisted the anti-republican majority disposition and its ideological implications. The Catholic examples of the German South, notably that of Bavaria, are also taken into account. Here, the aristocratic elites did not radicalise in the same manner as their East Elbian counterparts. In Malinowski's analysis the more stable economic situation of the *Kleinadel* in the South, the continued existence of a strong Wittelsbach-monarchism after 1918, and the evident influence of Catholicism separated the Bavarian nobility from its counterparts in other regions and effectively produced a North-South-division within the German nobility of the interwar-period.

This division perpetuated well into National Socialism, as Malinowski demonstrates in the concluding part of his study. Their perception of the new regime obscured by the expectation of gaining influence and power, the conservative elites within politics, administration, and the military displayed a high degree not only of cooperation but ideological affinity. This applied nowhere more than within the radicalised *Kleinadel* of Prussian Germany. An overlapping, often identical definition of one's enemies, anti-bourgeois and anti-Semitic mind-sets as well as a fundamental belief in the principles of one's own *Führertum* united some parts of the elites more with the National Socialist movement than an adherence to monarchism, Christian traditions, and the remaining conceptual differences separated the two.

Malinowski's approach to the issue of the nobility's relation to National Socialism benefits from his evasion of older interpretations that linked distance to the regime implicitly to resistance, as

reflected in Martin Broszat's problematic coining *Resistenz*. In opposition to that, Malinowski describes aristocratic reservations toward National Socialism as a culturally and habitually rooted difference, rarely of any political significance. He persuasively adopts Alf Lüdtke's two-fold concept of *Eigen-Sinn* to denote this phenomenon. This *Eigen-Sinn* of the nobility is reflected in copious examples such as the German diplomat Wipert von Blücher's derisive but nonetheless complacent reply to a formal inquiry about the whereabouts of his *Ariernachweis*: 'racially pure lineage down to 1214' [source with the reviewer] to the evident difficulties some aristocrats seemed to encounter when having to spell the name Hitler. Malinowski's research hence verifies Lüdtke's earlier conclusion that, despite appearances to the contrary, *Eigen-Sinn* in the end rather stabilised than eroded the regime's hold on power.

On the overproportionate involvement of aristocrats in the conservative resistance to Hitler and National Socialism Malinowski vehemently sides with scholarly positions of recent years aimed at the deconstruction of the resistance-myth. It is here where his thesis draws most heavily upon existing research. His insights will undoubtedly accelerate the crumbling of the Doenhoffian pantheon of conservative resisters, a trend widely approved within German historiographical circles [cf. reviews by Rainer Blasius/FAZ, Heinrich August Winkler/Die Zeit].

Another aspect worth noting is Malinowski's exceptionally lucid, entertaining and comprehensive style, sadly not necessarily representative of the German historiography of the last decades. His almost playful attitude towards language stands out above all when arranging the abundance of *bons mots* he has extracted from his archival sources. This only adds to the overall impression that Malinowski has provided us with a very substantial and extremely intelligent contribution to both the social history and the history of mentalities of the late Empire and the inter-war-period. Malinowski's published thesis will undoubtedly have a strong impact on German *Adelsforschung* and fuel the mainly regional research needed to appreciate the variety of dispositions within the German nobility of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-c.

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