



Helmuth Kiesel. *Ernst Jünger: Die Biographie*. Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2007. 717 pp. ISBN 978-3-88680-852-6.



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## Ernst Jünger as *Sachverhalt*

Ernst Jünger is one of a handful of figures in the intellectual history of modern Germany to whom the qualifier “controversial” has become almost indelibly attached. As with others—jurist Carl Schmitt and philosopher Martin Heidegger come to mind—the controversy surrounding Jünger arises from the problem of what to do with a thinker of genuine depth and originality who, despite necessary caveats about degrees of affinity and collaboration, clearly flew too close to the fascist sun. Jünger, it must be stated upfront, was never a Nazi. His thinking, however, was close enough to National Socialist ideology for the taint to stick, and the second half of Jünger’s centenarian life was lived in the shadow of the works he produced in the first. These included a host of ambitiously literary and often bellicose accounts of his experience in the trenches in the First World War, dozens of reviews and journalistic salvos for publications on Weimar’s radical Right, and prophecies (with seeming endorsements) of a dawning age of totalitarianism and “total mobilization.” No less problematic was Jünger’s post-1933 withdrawal into the so-called inner emigration, out of which

he produced both an allegorical narrative and a personal chronicle of the struggle for dignity and spiritual resistance under Nazi rule, while at the same time accepting (more or less passively) its historical inevitability.

It is one of the central claims of Helmuth Kiesel’s new biography of Ernst Jünger that an evaluation of his life and work cannot simply end in 1945, as though the following half-century—in which Jünger returned repeatedly and with fresh eyes to the problems of war and global politics, ethics and nihilism, technology and democracy—had passed him by. Kiesel takes special aim at what he sees as the tendency, among scholars and the public alike, to cloak Jünger in taboos derived from a tendentious reading of his early work. He cites as a case in point Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s judgment of Jünger as one of the “greatest criminals of modern German cultural history” (p. 16). Kiesel’s other chief claim is that taking the true measure of Jünger’s work requires, at least in part, its contextualization in the historical world in which it was produced. This is not to say that other standards cannot also be brought to bear or that Jünger is “sancrosanct.”

Rather, it is that “justice demands as well a consideration of the historical circumstances, and the interest in a more broadly based and penetrating historical understanding should refrain from declaring off limits certain objects of inquiry. Moreover, the complex circumstances of a case (*komplexes Sachverhalten*)—and the object of this book should be considered as such—cannot be dealt with by simple set phrases” (p. 18).

Neither of these claims is, at first blush, particularly shocking, amounting, as they do, to the injunction to read carefully and historicize. Yet the success of such a *Sachverhalt*, a term with distinct legal connotations, implying the careful scrutiny of fact and weighing of evidence, ultimately involves more than the application of basic critical tools. Kiesel largely succeeds in the details, but seems strangely incurious about the anxieties of Jünger’s critics and the stakes involved in “relativizing” so radioactive a figure.

There should, however, be no mistake: this is a genuinely illuminating book and, in many ways, an accomplished work of intellectual biography. Its author has devoted the better part of a career to the problems of literary modernity, including a number of important earlier works on Jünger.<sup>[1]</sup> Kiesel’s pronouncements, while not always conclusive or even original, are nearly always reasonable, grounded in a thorough survey of the primary and secondary literature and the available correspondence. Over the course of more than 650 pages, Kiesel critically examines the thorniest debates in the Jünger literature, along with all of Jünger’s major (and many of his minor) works. Quite a few caricatures and well-worn clichés fall, or are at least made to totter. His language is, for the most part, restrained throughout; unlike some earlier Jünger biographers, Kiesel includes no misty-eyed tales of heroism and personal honor. Given the absence of a full-scale biography of Jünger in English, one hopes this book will find a translator.

The methods by which Kiesel lays out his case are straightforward enough. The first is the tactic of the surprising (and sometimes not so surprising) juxtaposition, combined with extensive citation from Jünger’s lesser-known works. Thus, on the question of whether Jünger glorified war, Kiesel marches out an array of figures from the 1910s and 1920s, several of whom hardly shared Jünger’s later politics, but all of whom demonstrate “how difficult it was for contemporaries to resist the suggestion that war meant, not misery and barbarism ... but rather a chance to prove one’s masculinity and a salvation from the unheroic existence of a stale and

jaded civilian life” (p. 86). Kiesel adduces here personalities as diverse as Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Arnold Zweig. More enlightening are passages from Jünger’s original war diaries, which clearly show moments of deep disillusionment and growing reservation about the war. If these sentiments were largely purged in the process of transforming the diaries into his war memoirs in the early and mid 1920s, it was not, Kiesel maintains, because Jünger now understood any less clearly the realities of modern war. Rather, what appears as the “Kriegslust” of these works was an intense desire to harvest the meaning of his experience, and to see the First World War—and war generally—in a redemptive light. Kiesel is attentive here to what separates Jünger from, say, Thomas Mann; but the overall thrust of such passages is to position Jünger as a figure very much in the intellectual mainstream of his day, one whose worldview could be assembled piecemeal from the conceptual raw material around him.

Kiesel’s second method, which appears less frequently, is something of an unstated thesis of the book. Contemporaries who reacted to Jünger’s work, Kiesel implies, and especially those who had experienced what Jünger was struggling to represent, understood his purpose in a way that has often eluded later scholars. Thus we encounter effusive praise of Jünger’s authenticity as a writer from the decidedly anti-militaristic Erich Maria Remarque, the resonance of his (admittedly problematic) “resistance” novel *Auf die Marmorklippen* (1939) among readers in Nazi Germany, as well as the powerful appeal of Jünger’s nonconformity and spiritual elitism among certain members of the East German intelligentsia, most notably dramatist Heiner Müller. Kiesel nonetheless qualifies this judgment from the standpoint of his third principal tactic, namely, the insistence that Jünger’s work also be understood through the lens of his own idiosyncratic, and often esoteric, principles and aims. This stance hardly immunizes Jünger from criticism, as Kiesel repeatedly stresses. But his lengthy treatment of Jünger’s often decades-long encounters with the works of Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Nietzsche, the French Symbolists, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Leon Bloy, and the Christian scriptures (among many others) makes clear that anyone grappling with Jünger from outside his peculiar frame of reference will miss much of his richness, complexity, and meaning. On the question of Jünger’s valorization and aestheticization of war, Kiesel employs this critical apparatus to suggest that, far from evading or trivializing the reality of combat in a technological age, Jünger’s war writings were in fact facing it head on; indeed, their re-

alism could even be read as an implicit condemnation of war. Jünger's ethic as a writer, Kiesel notes, was one of detached observation, deep reflection, and honest depiction, with the aim of "adding something of importance to the existing insight into the world" (p. 664). That Jünger saw the First World War from the standpoint of the 1920s as "the school of modernity" and thus viewed his own experience as the "key to the interpretation of the epoch" (p. 260) hardly excuses the militarism of his early work, but it does help us understand it.

Much the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of Kiesel's other efforts to transform flash points of the Jünger controversy into *Sachverhalt*, from Jünger's contacts with the Nazis and the nature of his anti-democratic politics, to his status as an "inner emigrant" and his post-1945 refusal to renounce openly his earlier work. At times, however, Kiesel's attempt to present Jünger as just another wayward fish in the murky waters of the inter-war period strains credibility. We may agree that "the Weimar Republic did not collapse due to Jünger alone," but the linked claim that Jünger's role was "no larger than that of numerous prominent representatives of the anti-parliamentary left" (p. 16) requires asking the kinds of questions that Kiesel largely neglects to pose. Can we not speak, after all, of relative degrees of responsibility? Was the pacifist Kurt Tucholsky, whom Kiesel names as one such "prominent representative," as responsible as Jünger for Weimar's demise? And if so, was he also as responsible for what replaced it? Kiesel's parallels between the increasingly famous and well-connected Jünger and the then still obscure Walter Benjamin are similarly questionable. While Benjamin's 1933 essay "Experience and Poverty" does indeed call for "a new, positive concept of barbarism," does this justify the equal division of responsibility suggested by Kiesel's remark that Benjamin "would have fit well into the somewhat colorless" parts of Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* (1932) (pp. 398-399)? A pedantic tallying of blame is surely unnecessary, but just as surely, a *Sachverhalt* requires a more forthright accounting of Jünger's share of the burden.[2]

To be sure, Kiesel acknowledges the most important critical work on Jünger and, as often as not, shares its conclusions. But there is at times a dismissiveness to this confrontation, a lack of real engagement with those who are less convinced of the value of Jünger's writings, and a tone that suggests Kiesel regards some of their criticism as petty and point-missing. This attitude is most evident in his discussion of Jünger's post-1945 work, which Kiesel openly praises for the profundity and sheer tenacity—even at times precocity—of its struggle

to make sense of the modern condition. Kiesel credits Jünger, for instance, as a "precursor of the environmental movement," and extols the "diagnostic richness" and "oft-denied human quality" of his work (pp. 16, 614).

Nowhere is this dismissiveness clearer than in Kiesel's all-too-brief account of the debate surrounding Jünger's receipt of the prestigious Goethe Prize in 1982.[3] Opposition to the decision, voiced chiefly by the political Left, is briefly cited, only to be steamrolled by a far lengthier passage in favor. It is telling that Kiesel announces this rebuttal with a touch of sarcasm: "In France a great writer can happily have once been a great fascist, while in Germany an author can hardly be honored who once stirred in the vicinity of fascism" (p. 649). This maneuver, by which criticism of Jünger is established only to be shown wanting, without its full force being drawn out and accounted for, is by no means ubiquitous in Kiesel's biography, but it appears often enough. One suspects that this same impatience with critiques of Jünger's work also lies behind the author's failure to address the cultural stakes of the "relativizing" he engages in. Is this the same "normalizing" of the German past that was at the center of the *Historikerstreit* over a decade ago? And if, as Kiesel hastily proclaims, the *Historikerstreit* was far more "a political and pedagogical debate than a professional one" (p. 553), are the implications of such a normalization of Jünger's public image not worth addressing? Kiesel dismisses, for instance, Jünger's earlier belief in the "indispensable cleansing of circumstances" through catastrophe as "the ideology of a past era" that "requires no more discussion" (p. 480). One can hardly help pointing out that it is the very "pastness" of this past that has long been at issue. Ultimately, a closer approximation to the *Sachverhalt* at which Kiesel aims would be more attentive to the legitimate concerns of Jünger's critics, and more sensitive to, say, the historical conditions that have made the French reception of Jünger's work so different from that in Germany. Whether or not its conclusions remained the same, it would show a greater ability to contextualize the controversy itself.

The historian François Furet famously lamented that, nearly two centuries later, interpretations of the French Revolution were still dominated by the passions of political partisanship. "The French Revolution is over," Furet declared, suggesting that it was high time for the events of 1789 and 1793 to take their place alongside the Merovingian kings as objects of dispassionate historical analysis.[4] It is both the strength and weakness of Kiesel's biography that he is prepared to treat Jünger in such a fashion, ostensibly free from the politically

charged reactions that long governed the Jünger literature. It is to Kiesel's credit that he achieves the critical balance he does, and with the close attention to the complexities and tensions of Jünger's sprawling oeuvre that is the book's real strength. But one wishes, to borrow again from Furet, that Kiesel would "show his colors," at least to the extent of addressing the larger aims of a book clearly intended for a broad, non-academic audience. For, among scholars, Kiesel is surely preaching to the choir. Wehler's condemnation of Jünger hardly represents the academic state of the art, and a full-scale renaissance in Jünger studies has been underway since at least the early 1990s. Revisionism, of course, is rarely driven by the cause of "justice" alone. For all Kiesel's attention to the post-1945 developments in Jünger's work—and there is much of interest here—one still wonders about the extent to which Jünger's thinking remained locked in the categories of the Weimar "conservative revolution." Can a "good" Jünger really be salvaged, one who might serve as a starting point in contemporary debates? There are compelling grounds for skepticism. Jünger remained committed to the end to a philosophy that privileges the chthonic, mythic, magical, and rapturous at the expense of critical reason and democratic discourse. Consequently, one finds next to nothing in his work to suggest an interest in the sober investigation of the social and economic configurations that help shape historical events. Kiesel, who seems most convinced of the later Jünger's importance as a proto-environmentalist and critic of technological domination, spends little time addressing these continuities in Jünger's thought, or asking whether such "positive" elements might not also be found elsewhere and with less baggage.

The overall effect of Kiesel's biography is certainly to burnish Jünger's public image. Kiesel does this in part by distancing Jünger from elements of the New Right, including the historian Ernst Nolte, in whose company he has so often been placed. To those who would locate Jünger at the center of a right-wing network intent on "radicalizing and organizing conservatism in Germany," Kiesel cautions sobriety and maintains that such forces "could neither invoke nor expect support from Jünger" (pp. 654-655). It is true that Jünger has been less important than others, notably Carl Schmitt, as an explicit point of reference for the New Right. Yet Kiesel's treatment of such concerns, however exaggerated they may at times become, is far too glib, sidestepping serious claims about deep affinities and discursive parallels between Jünger's post-1945 work and the publications and cultural strategies of the New Right.[5] Is it entirely a coincidence, after

all, that two of the most influential figures on the New Right, Armin Mohler and Heimo Schwillk, did stints as private secretaries to Jünger and have worked so hard to influence the public reception of his work? Far from wanting to enlist Jünger in the cause of a resurgent Right, Kiesel tends to err on the side of the demobilized and withdrawn Jünger who never fully emerged from the inner emigration.

This is nonetheless a biography that succeeds on many levels, not the least of which is its ability to convey what has made Ernst Jünger so fascinating to so many. On the whole, Kiesel's stance toward Jünger seems to follow closely that of Golo Mann, whose critical evaluation of Jünger he has cited approvingly in the past. Mann wrote in a 1960 essay that Jünger should be viewed as a latter-day incarnation of the *Originalphilosophen* of the eighteenth century, and that, "even if we wish he would add to the independence he has shown (from the public and the powers that be) a similar independence from the mistakes of his own past ... we still count him among those who make our lives a little richer and from whom one can, with caution, also learn." [6] Kiesel has produced a vindication of Jünger's life and work, one concerned less with defending Jünger's ideas and choices than his status as a writer. It is a vindication of the reach and seriousness of his thought, and of the legitimacy of our attention to it.

#### Notes

[1]. See especially, Helmuth Kiesel, *Wissenschaftlich Diagnose und dichterische Vision der Moderne: Max Weber und Ernst Jünger* (Heidelberg: Manutius Verlag, 1994).

[2]. For an account of Jünger's positive contribution to the development of Nazi ideology, see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), esp. 70-108.

[3]. Kiesel fails to explore in depth the politics behind the Goethe Prize decision or Jünger's status as a darling of the 1980s conservative establishment. For a more extensive treatment, see Elliot Y. Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). For Kiesel's review of Neaman's account, see "Ein Eremit geht über die Grenze," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 15, 2000, Feuilleton, p. 42.

[4]. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1981), 1.

[5]. See, for instance, Horst Seferens, "*Leute von übermorgen und von vorgestern*": *Ernst Jüngers Ikonographie der Gegenaufklärung und die deutsche Rechte nach 1945* (Bodenheim: Philo, 1998).

[6]. The passage is cited in Helmuth Kiesel, "Ernst Jünger 1895-1995: Eine kritische Würdigung von Leben und Werk," *Les Carnets* 2 (1997): 11-12. Kiesel adds: "It goes without saying that by 'learn' Golo Mann did not mean deriving doctrines and instructions, but rather taking as an object of reflection the historical experience contained in a work."

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