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 **“The Great Pioneer of National Socialist Philosophy”?:
Carlyle and Twentieth-Century Totalitarianism**

David R. Sorensen

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Department of English, Georgia State University

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**“The Great Pioneer of National Socialist
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David R. Sorensen (bio)

Thomas Carlyle occupies a highly unusual place in any discussion of twentieth-century totalitarian political religions. He was the first historian in the nineteenth century to recognize and to re-create the French Revolution as a spiritual as well as a political phenomenon. Well before Alexis de Tocqueville and Jules Michelet, Carlyle understood that the most salient aspect of the Sansculottes' "Gospel according to Jean-Jacques" was its absolute repudiation of the past and its messianic embrace of a purified future, worshipped and sanctified in popular public rituals, symbols, and liturgies (*Works* 2: 54).¹ In *The French Revolution*, he unfolded with an equal mixture of scorn and pity the tragic consequences of the Jacobins' brutal attempts to harness the inchoate religious sentiments of "le peuple" towards the creation of a "new Political Evangel" (*Works* 2: 128). Yet, by the conclusion of the twentieth century, Carlyle—the first and most prescient prophet of "the totalitarian temptation"²—was himself bracketed with those "heroic vitalists" who had inspired Nazi and Bolshevik projectors to realize their respective versions of an earthly paradise through unprecedented mass indoctrination and violence.³ His name became associated with the worst excesses of mechanistic social engineering that he had so memorably denounced in his greatest history.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, those who still believed in Carlyle's message were at an obvious disadvantage in their bids to defend him. His notorious views on slavery, democracy, Negroes, Jews, and Irish Catholics inevitably linked him to the diabolical forces that had ravaged Europe. At best, he could be defended as a misanthropic opponent of Benthamite liberalism who thrived on paradox and Swiftian satire, and who deliberately used inflammatory language to stimulate his opponents and to generate debate. The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer,⁴ one of his subtlest advocates, pointed out in his posthumously published *The Myth of the State* that to "read into Carlyle's work ... a definite philosophical construction of the historical process ... or a definite political program is precarious and illusive" (191). Others tried to

isolate Carlyle from what **[End Page 43]** Michael Burleigh has called the “dystopian stain” of twentieth-century political religions by confining him in a Victorian context (xi). According to this thesis, he could not have foreseen how the widespread longing for political harmony in his own century would later be exploited and perverted by those who misused science and technology to cleanse history of human-perceived imperfection. Like Nietzsche, with whom he has often been compared, Carlyle could not be blamed for how his writings were interpreted in either Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Of Nietzsche, Karl Löwith has asserted that the

attempt to unburden [him] of ... intellectual “guilt,” or even to claim his support against what he brought about is just as unfounded as the reverse effort to make him the advocate of a matter over which he sits in judgment. Both [arguments] crumble before the historical insight that “forerunners” have ever prepared roads for others which they themselves did not travel. (200)

In the twenty-first century, such arguments themselves tend to “crumble” under the weight of accumulated barbarism, particularly when they are employed in relation to Carlyle. Responding to the example of Nietzsche, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski has shrewdly observed,

The Nazis told their supermen to read *The Will to Power*, and it is no good saying that this was a mere chance.... It is not a question of establishing the “guilt” of Nietzsche, who as an individual was not responsible for the use made of his writings; nevertheless, the fact that they were so used is bound to cause alarm and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the understanding of what was in his mind. (7–8)⁵

The Nazis also instructed their followers to read Carlyle, whom the American-born Anglophone fascist William Joyce called “the great pioneer of National-Socialist philosophy” (36). Carlyle’s well-documented

ties to Hitler, as well as his lesser-known links to Lenin and Stalin, remain deeply troubling.⁶ His connections to their violent ideologies should neither be underestimated...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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