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# Nazi Leadership and the Thule Society

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## Introduction

Recently, there have been presented some new results in the research of the Thule Society,<sup>(1)</sup> a German nationalistic and *völkisch*<sup>(2)</sup> secret society, which existed from 1917 until the middle of the thirties. It has been said that this organisation was a kind of gathering place for young *völkisch* prophets. The Thule Society built one of the most important platforms to establish their later Nazi-ideologies.<sup>(3)</sup> It was particularly the city of Munich, where all sorts of political thoughts met and this environment created the matrix of the different radicalisms.<sup>(4)</sup> The members of the Thule Society, as well as a lot of other *völkisch* activists worked in these circumstances. Some famous Nazis like Rudolf Hess and Alfred Rosenberg were among them. However, in statements about this secret society and its influence of National Socialism there are a lot of mistakes. Many of them were conserved unproved again and again. Auerbach, for example, states that even Gottfried Feder and Dietrich Eckart were Thule-brothers,<sup>(5)</sup> but in fact they only had rather superficial contacts to some Thule members.

The aim of this essay is to show how close the connection of leading Nazis of the 1920s to the Thule Society really was and to prove her ancestorship to national socialistic leadership and its ideas. For this purpose, there will be a short introduction about the history of this secret society from its foundation in 1917 till its end in the 1930s (II). The following chapter is about famous Thule members and people like Eckart, who had a regular contact with it and about their influence or an indirect one of the secret society on the genesis of National Socialism (III). For a conclusion there should be some evaluation of Thule-influence on national socialist thoughts and actions (IV).

## A short history of the Thule Society

The Thule Society was not a totally new kind of secret organisation in the *völkisch* section of the

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(1) Frank Jacob, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft*, Berlin, 2010.

(2) *Völkisch* is a self-denomination of organizations in Germany and Austria-Hungary, which had been used since the end of the 19th century. *Völkisch* organizations substituted a nationalistic, racist, and anti-Semitic ideology.

(3) Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die deutsche Diktatur: Entstehung, Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus*, Köln/Berlin, 1972, p. 88.

(4) Gerhard Schulz, *Aufstieg des Nationalsozialismus: Krise und Revolution in Deutschland*, Frankfurt e.a. 1975, p. 188.

(5) Hellmuth Auerbach, "Hitlers Politische Lehrjahre und die Münchener Gesellschaft 1919-1923", *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 25 (1977), pp. 1-45, p. 9.

German Empire, but it was rather an offshoot of the Germanenorder, which had been founded by Theodor Fritsch in 1912. This secret society regarded Freemasonry as its antagonist and believed that a conspiracy against the Germans was on its way. Germany had been the victim in the Marocco crisis in 1911 and the Social Democrats won the election in 1912 with an incredible advance compared to the anti-Semitic parties. Those events made the founders of the Germanenorder believe that it was time to strike back.

The new secret society and its leaders tried to build up an antipole to these changes and organized themselves by following the symbolism of the Freemasons. They had several lodges in Germany, mainly in the north. In 1917 Rudolf von Sebottendorff, the later leader of the Thule Society, got an appointment to restore a southern lodge in Munich, where the Germanenorder had only few members and during the war the connection to its leadership and the mother lodge of Berlin got lost.

Sebottendorff was very successful and able to gain new members. However, after World War I, because of the growing influence of the left in Munich, the name was changed into Thule Society. In the time of the Munich Soviet Republic, the Thule members served as spies and saboteurs for the government in exile at Bamberg. On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1919 there had been a razzia in the Thule-rooms and the police was able to get in possession of a list, which contained the names of all Thule members. Some of them were captured and executed on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1919, just one day before Munich was freed by several *Freikorps* and *Reichswehr* troops.

Those victims were later stylised as the first victims for the Nazi movement. Though, with the end of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, the Thule Society lost its reason to exist and after Sebottendorff left Munich the activities of the society decreased. In the middle of the twenties the society finally disappeared. In 1933, after the gain of power of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party), Sebottendorff tried his comeback and wrote his book about the early times of the Nazi movement,<sup>(6)</sup> in which he draw a picture of an elementary influence of the Thule Society on the genesis of National Socialism. Consequently, Sebottendorff had to leave Germany again, his book was banned, because

the use of the name of the *Führer* for the title of the book apparently just serves economical reasons. By accentuation of the *Führer's* name, there should be simply a higher sale of the book and therewith a better possibility of income. [...] The whole tendency of the book has the aim to take the main credit for the national renewal of Germany in a contrary way for the Thule Society.<sup>(7)</sup>

The re-established Thule Society could exist again just for some years to finally disappear

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(6) Rudolf von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam: Urkundliches aus der Frühzeit der Nationalsozialistischen Bewegung*, München, 1933.

(7) Beschluss der Bayerischen Politischen Polizei vom 1.3.1934 an den Dekulta- Verlag Grassinger & Co. München, Bundesarchiv Berlin NS 26/2234.

in the middle of the 1930s.

Sebottendorff wrote that Thule members were the first persons that helped Hitler on his way to power and also the first ones that supported the future leader of Germany.<sup>(8)</sup> In the following chapter, it will be proved, how far this declaration can be regarded as a historical fact.

## Famous Thule members and their influence on the genesis of National Socialism

For this reason, there will be some analysis about the connection of Thule members and persons, who had a regular contact with the society. Beyond that, there shall be a proof of possible influence on National Socialism. For this purpose Gottfried Feder, Alfred Rosenberg, Dietrich Eckart, Hans Frank and Rudolf Hess will be checked individually, so that their possible influence could be determined.

### 1. GOTTFRIED FEDER (1883-1941)

Gottfried Feder<sup>(9)</sup> was not a member of the Thule Society. He was rather a casual visitor of its rooms at the Hotel *Vierjahreszeiten* in Munich. There from December 1918 onwards, he held some lectures about his theory about the *Brechung der Zinsknechtschaft*.<sup>(10)</sup> This was not an exception for Feder, who would always lecture, if he got the possibility. So he met some of the Thule members and guests like Dietrich Eckart at these lecture evenings, but there was no kind of close contact between him and the society, which would have lasted a longer time.

It remains the question of whether there was any influence of Feder on National Socialism. It is hard to account his role for the development of the NSDAP party program, even if some points reflect Feder's own agenda.<sup>(11)</sup> He declared, that the

The Breaking of the Interest Bondage is the steel axis, around which everything turns, (...) anything less the main question of the economic attitude, and by this it interferes with the political life of each person, it calls for everyone's decision: service of nation or borderless private enrichment – by this it means “the solution of the social question”.<sup>(12)</sup>

When Hitler heard Feder's presentation on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1919 it “represented one of the most

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(8) Ibid., Dedication.

(9) For life and work of Feder, Albrecht Tyrell, “Gottfried Feder - Der gescheiterte Programmatiker”, Ronald Smelser, Rainer Zittelmann (ed.), *Die Braune Elite*, Darmstadt, 1989, pp. 28-40.

(10) Albrecht Tyrell, “Gottfried Feder and the NSDAP”, Peter D. Stachura (ed.), *The Shaping of the Nazi State*, New York, 1978, pp. 48-87, p. 54.

(11) Albrecht Tyrell, *Vom 'Trommler' zum 'Führer': Der Wandel von Hitlers Selbstverständnis zwischen 1919 und 1924 und die Entwicklung der NSDAP*, München, 1975, p. 84f.

(12) Gottfried Feder, *Das Programm der N.S.D.A.P. und seine weltanschaulichen Grundlagen*, München, 1931, p. 32.

important events in Hitler's political development".<sup>(13)</sup> His manifesto gave him a possibility to establish a self-confident program, which could challenge Marxism. But irrespective of this influence on the party's programmatic outlines Feder "remained an outsider".<sup>(14)</sup> His theories about the *Brechung der Zinsknechtschaft des Geldes* were never officially accepted as a target of the NSDAP and in the framework of the Nazi party there was no place for Feder. In November 1931 he got a rather unimportant employment as the leader of the German *Reichswirtschaftsrat*. From July 1933 till August 1934 he held a post at the Ministry of Economics. After this short time in governmental positions, he became a professor for settlement, land use planning and urban development at Berlin.

After all we can say that Feder had never been a leading Nazi and even if

his views had been useful in the 1920s as the Nazis formed an opposition movement by recruiting angry, impoverished, and xenophobic followers, but they were not practical in a new government seeking permanence and power through rapid reindustrialization and rearmament.<sup>(15)</sup>

So his descent after the takeover through the NSDAP isn't astonishing. But there are other ones, who had closer contact to the Thule Society.

## 2. ALFRED ROSENBERG (1893-1946)

Alfred Rosenberg<sup>(16)</sup> was another guest of the society, but in contrast to the claim of Vieler,<sup>(17)</sup> he was not a member. The Baltic German met a former working colleague (Miss von Schrenck) at Munich, who sent him to Dietrich Eckart, because Rosenberg was looking for a job in the journalistic field.<sup>(18)</sup> In his last records, which he wrote during the Nürnberg trial he states about the Munich Soviet Republic as follows:

The first victims were caught out of the Thule Society, viz. out of an association, which attended to the ancient Germanic history and opposed the Jewry, but without political activity.<sup>(19)</sup>

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(13) Ralph Max Engelman, *Dietrich Eckart and the Genesis of Nazism*, Ann Arbor/Michigan, 1979, p. 155.

(14) Tyrell, *Gottfried Feder*, p. 55.

(15) Tilman A. Schenk, Ray Bromley, "Mass- Producing Traditional Small Cities: Gottfried Feder's Vision for a Greater Nazi Germany", *Journal of Planning History*, Vol. 2 (2003), pp. 107-139, p. 112.

(16) For Rosenberg's life and work, Claus Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus: Die religiöse Dimension der NS- Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler*, München, 1998, pp. 193-197.

(17) Eric H. Vieler, *The Ideological Roots of German National Socialism*, New York, 1999, p. 46.

(18) Alfred Rosenberg, *Letzte Aufzeichnungen: Ideale und Idole der Nationalsozialistischen Revolution*, Göttingen, 1955, p. 72.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 79.

This means that Rosenberg knew about the Thule Society but couldn't have been a member, because if he had been, he would have known about the activities of this secret society. He perhaps just sometimes visited their rooms as a companion of Eckart.

With regard to his influence on National Socialism, "to claim that Rosenberg had no influence on Hitler is absurd",<sup>(20)</sup> but it would be absurd as well to say that his influence was of enormous value. At the beginning of the NSDAP, Rosenberg was a specialist for Russian circumstances and he approximated his thoughts about the Soviet Union to Hitler.<sup>(21)</sup> By doing that he took some kind of direct influence on the coming leader of Germany. The strong anti-Soviet line of the Nazi party was also a consequence of Rosenbergs works and conspiracy theories about the Soviet Republic and the Jews. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1933 he got the appointment to establish the *Außenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP* and since 1934 he became responsible for the ideological education of the party.

Hearing about his functions one could intend that he had a fast rise inside the leadership of Nazi Germany. However, these functions were rather formal and Rosenberg was no leading member of Hitler's inner circle. Although his book *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*<sup>(22)</sup> was a kind of fight against the churches and a try to establish a new party religion, even Hitler once confessed that he had never read it completely.<sup>(23)</sup> Beyond that, Hitler was not willing to fight the position of the church directly, but tried to avoid any conflict with it. Thus one is able to conclude that Rosenberg's influence had existed at the beginning, but not at the maximum of Hitler's power and that during this period no connection between Rosenberg and the Thule Society could be documented.

### 3. DIETRICH ECKART (1868-1923)

Much more influence on Hitler had Dietrich Eckart,<sup>(24)</sup> who was characterized by the *Münchener Post* as a man, who would enjoy eating up a dozen Jews on his sauerkraut every day.<sup>(25)</sup> Already in 1918, Sebottendorff had been contacted by Eckart, who asked for a financial support for his own anti-Semitic magazine *Auf gut deutsch*.<sup>(26)</sup> The Thule leader had to refuse that, because he already financed the *Münchener Beobachter*. This could have been a reason why

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(20) Vieler, *The Ideological Roots*, p. 60.

(21) Geoffrey Stoakes, "The Evolution of Hitler's Ideas on Foreign Policy, 1919-1925", Peter D. Stachura (ed.), *The Shaping of the Nazi State*, New York, 1978, pp. 22-47, p. 24.

(22) Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, München, 1936.

(23) Albert Speer, *Die Kransberg-Protokolle 1945: Seine ersten Aussagen und Aufzeichnungen (Juni-September)*, ed. by Ulrich Schlie, München, 2003, p. 200.

(24) For life and works, Claus Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus. Die religiöse Dimension der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler*, München, 1998, p. 53f.

(25) Margarete Plewnia, "Auf schlecht deutsch - Der Kronzeuge der 'Bewegung': Dietrich Eckart", Karl Schwedhelm (ed.), *Propheten des Nationalismus*, München, 1969, pp. 159-175, p. 168.

(26) Engelman, *Dietrich Eckart*, p. 103.

Eckart didn't become a member of the Thule Society,<sup>(27)</sup> but perhaps it was just because of his temperament that he never joined any kind of organization. "Rather he strove to broaden his base as an independent publicist"<sup>(28)</sup> and pursued his own targets.

It goes too far to call him the chief ideologue of the Thule Society, like Orzechowski did.<sup>(29)</sup> He just had regular contacts with the secret society and was often useful for its members. During the time of the Bavarian Soviet Republic he worked in close cooperation with the Thule-Kampfbund, a paramilitary group committing spying and sabotage. After the razzia in the rooms of the Thule Society he corrupted some policemen, who let some of the caught members, go.<sup>(30)</sup> But even if he had such a close relationship with the Thule members during those days he didn't become an official insider.

Regarding his influence and his connection to Hitler appears a totally different picture. Eckart was one of the closest friends the Nazi leader ever had and he influenced the younger man in many ways. Kershaw brought it to the point by saying that the older anti-Semite "blazed the trail for the beer cellar demagogue to the high-society of Munich and opened the doors to the salons of prosperous and influential citizens".<sup>(31)</sup> However Eckart not only influenced Hitler, but also we can find his thoughts and beliefs in the party program. For example, the 24<sup>th</sup> point indicates Eckart's paranoid anti-Semitism.<sup>(32)</sup> This kind of messages against the Jews is also visible in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, which had been edited by Dietrich Eckart for a while.

Though he had a good connection to the Thule Society and Adolf Hitler, it must be emphasized that one cannot speak of a direct influence of the Thule Society on Hitler, because Eckart had been an anti-Semite long before he visited the rooms at the Hotel *Vierjahreszeiten*.

Certainly there are real Thule members, who made a career in the Third Reich and whose connection should be more significant.

#### 4. HANS FRANK (1900-1946)

Hans Frank<sup>(33)</sup> finished school in 1918 at a Munich gymnasium and entered the Thule Society and the Freikorps Epp to fight against the Bavarian Soviet Republic.<sup>(34)</sup> In his last records Frank himself writes about his membership in the secret society<sup>(35)</sup>, but he did not become a constant member of the Thule, because, after the end of the communistic reign of terror, he saw no need for a prolonged

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(27) Eduard Gugenberger, *Hitlers Visionäre: Die okkulten Wegbereiter des Dritten Reichs*, Wien, 2001, p. 30.

(28) Engelman, *Dietrich Eckart*, p. 144.

(29) Peter Orzechowski, *Schwarze Magie - Braune Macht*, Ravensburg, [1987], p. 130.

(30) Engelman, *Dietrich Eckart*, p. 134f.

(31) Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, Vol. 1, 1889-1936, München, 2002, p. 201.

(32) Stefan Breuer, *Nationalismus und Faschismus: Frankreich, Italien und Deutschland im Vergleich*, Darmstadt, 2005, p. 155.

(33) For Frank's life and works, Stanislaw Piotrowski, *Hans Franks Tagebuch*, Warschau, 1963, pp. 11-28.

(34) Christoph Klessmann, "Hans Frank - Parteijurist und Generalgouverneur in Polen", Ronald Smelser, Rainer Zittelmann (ed.), *Die Braune Elite*, Darmstadt, 1989, pp. 41-51, p. 41.

(35) Hans Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens: Deutung Hitlers und seiner Zeit auf Grund eigener Erlebnisse und Erkenntnisse*, Neuhaus bei Schliersee, 1955, p. 15.

membership.<sup>(36)</sup>

After that Frank was able to make a long career in the Nazi party. In 1923 he took part in Hitler's putsch.<sup>(37)</sup> In the party organization of the following years he advanced to a position as the NSDAP star jurist.<sup>(38)</sup> He advocated many party members as well as Hitler in a lot of court cases. When the Nazis took power he was Bavarian Minister of Justice for a short time and he maintained a minister without portfolio till the end of the Second World War, although he held the office as General Governor of Poland since 1939.

Even if Frank had the special assignment to determine Hitler's family tree, which made him an "intimate adept of Hitler's none too exemplary family tree",<sup>(39)</sup> he was never part of the inner circle of Nazi leadership.<sup>(40)</sup>

To line out possible influence of the Thule Society one just has to look for the dates. In 1919 Frank left the secret society. That was long before his career in the NSDAP really started and even if he still had have connections to other Thule members his personal influence on Nazi development would have been too low.

#### 5. RUDOLF HESS (1894-1987)

The most influential Thule member was probably Rudolf Hess. He was introduced to the Thule Society by his friend Hofweber,<sup>(41)</sup> who supplied a job for the young student as well. Here the young man was able to find what he was looking for. The mixture of secret fighting against the communists and the presentations about occultist topics opened a totally new and interesting world for Hess. During the Bavarian Soviet Republic he was the leader of the counterfeiter group inside the Thule Society, whose members committed forgery of train tickets to bring persons at risk and spies out of Munich. Hess was perhaps the longest member of the Thule, who also played a role in the NSDAP, because he still visited the society's rooms in 1934.<sup>(42)</sup> He always had a favor for horoscopes<sup>(43)</sup> and such mystical stuff and never stopped to show an interest for those things.

His connection to Adolf Hitler was a really special one. Both had very different personalities, but became close friends. Hess built up Hitler's ties to Ludendorff and promoted, like Eckart and Esser, the image of the future leader of Germany.<sup>(44)</sup> In 1933 he became the "Deputy to the *Führer*" and was a kind of middlemen for the geopolitical ideas of his teacher Karl Haushofer.

However, from 1935 onwards, he had lesser and lesser contact with Hitler and Borman

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(36) *Ibid.*, p. 25.

(37) Klessmann, *Hans Frank*, p. 42.

(38) Christoph Klessmann, "Der Generalgouverneur Hans Frank", *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 19 (1971), pp. 245-260, p. 249.

(39) *Ibid.*, p. 259.

(40) *Ibid.*, p. 245; Klessmann, *Hans Frank*, p. 41.

(41) Kurt Pätzold, Manfred Weißbecker, *Rudolf Heß: Der Mann an Hitlers Seite*, Leipzig, 1999, p. 30f.

(42) Hermann Gilbhard, *Die Thule-Gesellschaft: Vom okkulten Mummenschanz zum Hakenkreuz*, München, 1994, p. 175f.

(43) Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Karl Haushofer, Leben und Werk*, Vol.2, Boppard am Rhein, 1979, p. 21.

(44) Ian Kershaw, *Der Hitler-Mythos: Führerkult und Volksmeinung*, Stuttgart, 1999, p. 42f.; Pätzold, *Rudolf Heß*, p. 41.



became his successor. For Hitler he was perhaps just a “*Mittel zum Zweck*”<sup>(45)</sup> in the early days of the party history, as he could use the contacts of Hess to the moneyed citizens of Munich. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941 Hess flew to England and still today there is a harsh discussion about what he wanted to do there. But for the development of the events it didn't matter at all and was “politically unimportant”<sup>(46)</sup> and Churchill just named the flight an escapade. For Hitler the flight was a consequence of the influence of occultists on Hess, who had addled his mind.

Even if Hess was an adorer of the Führer and showed true love for him,<sup>(47)</sup> he was not able to conserve his influential position of the early twenties and we must conclude that he couldn't convey Thule thinking to the Nazi party.

## Conclusion

After analyzing the biographies of each character and the connections that Feder, Rosenberg, Eckart, Frank and Hess had to the Thule Society and to the Nazi leadership, one can deny an influence of the secret society on the genesis of National Socialism. No one of the former Thule members or guests of the secret society besides Hess had any close contact with it after 1919. And even if they have had any contact, their own position inside the NSDAP party would have been too low to impose influence upon the way of the Nazi movement.

Thus one is able to conclude that Sebottendorff just tried to oversubscribe the influence of the Thule Society to strengthen his own position in 1933 and by doing so he wanted to gain some possibilities for an income after the Nazis' *Machtergreifung*.

Every claim, which pleads for the existence of such a Thule influence, is just needed for conspiracy theories. In the centre of these theories there is an occult power behind the development of the Nazi movement, symbolized by the Thule Society. As a historian one can just fight against such fairy tales and try to point out the true happenings and events as good as possible.

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(45) Dietrich Orlow, “Rudolf Heß - ‘Stellvertreter des Führers’”, Ronald Smelser, Rainer Zittelmann (ed.), *Die Braune Elite*, Darmstadt, 1989, pp. 84-97, p. 87.

(46) Kenneth Matthews, “The Strange Case of Rudolf Hess”, *Blackwood's magazine*, Vol. 323 (1952), pp. 486-492, p. 488.

(47) Ilse Hess, *Ein Schicksal in Briefen: England- Nürnberg- Spandau, Gefangener des Friedens, Antwort aus Zelle Sieben*, Leoni am Starnberger See, 1971, p. 112; Bärsch, *Die politische Religion*, p. 157.