

# MOMENTS OF THE NEGATIVE

## TWO SMALL NIHILIST EPISODES FROM THE 1940S

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### *Abstract*

Evoking Leo Strauss's 1941 text "German Nihilism" and his forceful claim that nihilism is above all "the rejection of the principles of civilization as such," my intention is to thematize the possible forms of coexistence that survive and develop despite the negation and even exclusion of certain forms of civic forms of cooperation and collaboration, as well as insistence on a closed society in the Bergsonian or Popperian sense. If nihilism is often connected to a crisis of legitimacy and reasoned discourse,

with a crisis of justification of certain actions or manipulative and perverted uses of language and mind, with various protocols of destruction across many levels and taking many shapes, what interests me is the role of negation and a potential classification of various negative, socially negative, destructive, or nullifying actions and acts in the construction of (non)homogenous and (in)human social groups.

*Keywords:* nihilism, war, negation, destruction, affirmative negation.

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### **Momenti negativnega. Dve mali nihilistični epizodi iz štiridesetih let prejšnjega stoletja**

#### *Povzetek*

122 Sklicujoč se na besedilo Lea Straussa »Nemški nihilizem« iz leta 1941 in njegovo prepričljivo trditev, da je nihilizem predvsem »zavračanje načel civilizacije kot take«, želim tematizirati možne oblike sobivanja, ki preživijo in se razvijajo kljub zanikanju in celo izključevanju nekaterih oblik civilnega udeleževanja in sodelovanja, ter vztrajanje pri zaprti družbi v Bergsonovem ali Popperjevem smislu. Kolikor je nihilizem pogosto povezan s krizo legitimnosti in utemeljenega diskurza, s krizo upravičenosti določenih dejanj ali manipulativnih in sprevrženih rab jezika in uma, z različnimi protokoli uničevanja na različnih ravneh in v raznoterih oblikah, me zanima vloga negacije in morebitna klasifikacija različnih negativnih, družbeno negativnih, uničujočih ali izničevalnih delovanj in dejanj pri oblikovanju (ne)homogenih in (ne)človeških družbenih skupin.

*Ključne besede:* nihilizem, vojna, negacija, uničenje, afirmativna negacija.

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The lecture entitled “German Nihilism,” which was held by Leo Strauss on February 26, 1941, at the General Seminar of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research in New York, during what was then called “the present Anglo-German war” (Strauss 1999, 373), examines nihilism in some detail, unjustly attributing it only to forms and histories of German militarism (although they obviously do not belong to the civilized world, he writes that “Slavonic nations do not appear to be as militaristic as are the German”; *ibid.*, 370). Despite these definitions of nihilism and an indication of the “young” and as yet underdeveloped “Russian nihilism” (today, in what is certainly a different context, a lecture or paper on this topic would clearly be possible), my intention is to relativize the resistance and reticence to negation or violence as such, and in one way or another to affirm a future, ideal, timely, and generally coordinated, but also occasional and temporary use of extreme violence. Such a “positive” negation or justified and strictly limited use of extreme violence would not be the heritage of an abstract and grand liberal-democratic and civilized world, as Leo Strauss calls it. Rather, I would situate it at the foundation of the German (or analogously, Slavic) model of war and destruction. And vice versa. The idea of destruction can certainly not be any kind of special “Germanic” characteristic, because, for example, “wars of colonization” certainly possess genocidal characteristics, while also being justified, although they belong to the past and could never be repeated today (Russell 1915, 133–135). Nearly 30 years before Strauss, Bertrand Russell spoke of a kind of pseudo-“British nihilism,” of English fantasies of the destruction of Germany.

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When the present war began, many people in England imagined that if the Allies were victorious Germany would cease to exist: Germany was to be “destroyed” or “smashed,” and since these phrases sounded vigorous and cheering, people failed to see that they were totally devoid of meaning. There are some seventy million Germans; with great good fortune, we might, in a successful war, succeed in killing two millions of them. There would then still be sixty-eight million Germans, and in a few years the loss of population due to the war would be made good. Germany is not merely a State, but a nation, bound together by a common language, common traditions, and common ideals. Whatever the outcome of the war, this nation will still exist at the end of it, and

its strength cannot be permanently impaired. But imagination in what pertains to war is still dominated by Homer and the Old Testament. (Ibid., 135.)

By designating nihilism as “*velle nihil*,” to will the nothing, the destruction of everything, including oneself, and therefore primarily the will to self-destruction” (Strauss 1999, 357), and by describing German nihilism not as “absolute nihilism,” but “a desire for the destruction of something specific: of modern civilization” (“the spirit of the West, Anglo-Saxon West”; *ibid.*, 357–358), Leo Strauss explains that such type of destruction and war corresponds to such nihilism. “Love of War,” together with “the desire to destroy the present world and its potentialities, a desire not accompanied by any clear conception of what one wants to put in its place” (*ibid.*, 359), leads to pure destruction and war for its own sake.

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Our question: in favor of what does German nihilism reject the principles of civilization as such must therefore be answered by the statement: that it rejects those principles in favor of the military virtues. This is what Mr. Rauschnig must have had in mind when speaking of “heroic nihilism.”

War is a destructive business. And if war is considered more noble than peace, if war, and not peace, is considered the aim, the aim is for all practical purposes nothing other than destruction. There is reason for believing that the business of destroying, and killing, and torturing is a source of an almost disinterested pleasure to the Nazis as such, that they derive a genuine pleasure from the aspect of the strong and ruthless who subjugate, exploit, and torture the weak and helpless. [...]

German nihilism rejects then the principles of civilization as such in favor of war and conquest, in favor of the warlike virtues. [...] The view that war is good in itself, implies the rejection of the distinction between just and unjust wars, between wars of defense and wars of aggression. It is ultimately irreconcilable with the very idea of a law of nations. (*Ibid.*, 369.)

This gives a construction how such a collective act is now possible (remember that the *Blitzkrieg* over Britain was at that point taking place already for six months), and which, when deduced in this way, still allows for the affirmation of a group that Strauss designates with the name “Germanic” or “German.”

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Nihilism does not only consist of the set of aggressive and destructive acts that destroy everything around them, but leaves in its wake the potential to affirm its own identity or sovereignty, here designated as being “Germanic.” This appears partly contradictory, and certainly complex. The notion that an entity can be established by destroying another entity (yet without a “clear conception,” which is the condition and Strauss’s key characteristic of this war), that a group acquires its constitution through destruction of another group (“the genocidal act”)—cannot be entirely convincing. In the case of Germany conducting “German nihilism,” while Strauss is lecturing in New York, it is very important to add that the German aggression against the “Anglo-Saxon” would cease in two months. At the same time, the war would continue in an entirely different part of the European continent, where the “destructive business” will not be conducted against a liberal-democratic and civilized world. “Slavonic nations” and Russia are certainly no such thing, and it makes German nihilism absolute and significantly more complicated from Strauss’s designations. We find nihilism in the east as well or, indeed, encounter two kinds of nihilism; about the latter wrote Strauss’s professor, the person who, ten years prior, had guaranteed and recommended Leo Strauss and his work to the Rockefeller Foundation.

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On December 10, 1942, in a letter to Ernst Jünger (Strauss also mentions him in the lecture several times) who was at that moment on the eastern front, having recently arrived in the Caucasus, Carl Schmitt writes:

Do I need to send you my short book, *Land und Meer*? In the conclusion, I write that the history of humanity, based on ancient wisdom, is the movement of four elements [*ein Gang durch die 4 Elemente ist*]. We are now in fire. What has Prometheus said to you in the Caucasus? What one calls “nihilism” is burning in fire. The urge to have oneself cremated is “nihilism.” The Russians invented this word. From the ashes then arises the Phoenix, i.e., an imperium of the air. (Jünger and Schmitt 1999, 151; my translation.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The latter part of the text reads in the German: “Wir sind jetzt im Feuer. Was hat

It was not, in fact, the Russians who invented the word, but precisely the Germans.<sup>2</sup> Still, how does Bazarov, the protagonist of Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*, explain his mission and the grounding of "the nihilist act"? What does his extremist mission consist of?<sup>3</sup>

[...] I adhere to the negative (*отрицательного*) tendency—to bring it out by force. I am myself when I am negative, that is how my mind is constructed and basta! (Коньшев 2002, 137.)<sup>4</sup>

In "Hamlet and Don Quixote," lecture from January 10, 1860, Turgenev is quite clear when wondering about the secret force of negation:

Negation [*otricanie*], as fire, has a force that destroys—how can such force be held in check, how to reveal it, at what point to stop it when what it is meant to destroy and what it is necessary that it spare is often fused together and inextricably bound? (Ibid.; my translation.)<sup>5</sup>

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Ihnen Prometheus im Kaukasus gesagt? Was man 'Nihilismus' nennt, ist Verbrennung in Feuer. Der Drang, sich in Krematorien verbrennen zu lassen, ist 'Nihilismus'. Die Russen haben dieses Wort erfunden. Aus der Asche entsteht dann der Vogel Phönix, d. h. ein Reich der Luft."

2 Cf. the note by the editor of the correspondence who also calls Schmitt into question (ibid., 588).

3 One of the pillars or manifests of the organization "Young Russia" (for Leo Strauss, too, the young and not the old are bearers of nihilist actions), which was active at the time, when Turgenev was writing his novel, and to which he could have easily belonged, reads as follows. "We are not only the inheritors of the poor revolutionaries of '48, but also the terrorists of '92. We are not afraid to accept that the destruction of the current order will require twice as much blood as what the Jacobins spilled in the nineties." (Quoted in: Коньшев 2002, 135.)

4 Cf. Pöggeler 1975, 204–205: "L. S. Mercier *Néologie ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux* von 1801 definiert den 'nihiliste ou rienniste' als jemanden, 'qui ne croit à rien, qui ne s'intéresse à rien.'"

5 The Russian original reads: "Но в отрицании, как в огне, есть истребляющая сила — и как удержать эту силу в границах, как указать ей, где ей именно остановиться, когда то, что она должна истребить, и то, что ей следует пощадить, часто слито и связано неразрывно?" Hamlet's negation or Hamlet's denial, says further Turgenev, "is not evil, but is directed against evil [его отрицание не есть зло

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Schmitt fantasizes about “Russian nihilism” as preceding German or Germanic nihilism, but there is something else that is new and more complicated here: fire, Russian fire or the crematorium, which the German officer is expecting to encounter on enemy territory, is already present, preceding any action by him. In this sense, German nihilism (or the crematorium) would be no more than a response, a reaction to the Russian one that is prior. Once again, destruction is reduced, and negation is severely limited. Regardless of the fact that the fire or crematorium implies destruction *per se*, both Schmitt and Turgenev completely relativize Strauss’s or the nihilist matter in general. Turgenev, whose lecture Schmitt is almost certainly ignorant of, locates in the fire a force that could potentially be recognized and controlled. Specifically, Turgenev is entirely certain that the fire cannot burn everything, nor should it do so. Furthermore, it is probably possible to reconstruct a new whole, in which what was not eliminated can be “affirmed” into a new whole.

Carl Schmitt goes further still in the construction of the conception of and the reason for destruction. The fire or its nihilism implies a rebirth from the ashes of something entirely new. This means that we are looking at an entirely new world order, and not the end of everything. It is this new order (beyond nihilism) that introduces entirely new consequences.<sup>6</sup> In his diary entry on the day of September 7, 1951, Schmitt writes:

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What has poisoned the political atmosphere: Because too many corpses have been desecrated [*zu viele Leichen geschändet*], burned, and their ashes have flown into the air; because the air is full of the ashes of desecrated corpses denied an honest burial [*weil die Luft voll ist von der Asche geschänderter Leichen, denen man die ehrliche Beerdigung verweigert hat*]. (Schmitt 2015, 232.)

He is certainly referring to the failure of young and unfortunate nihilists who are not able to truly draw the border, of which Turgenev (and not only Turgenev) speaks, between that which force “must destroy and must spare.”

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— оно само направлено противу зла]” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Two of these consequences have been pointed out to me by Reinhard Mehring, for which I am very grateful.

Wading through these analogies and metaphors in Leo Strauss further, it is as if nihilism or the desire for destruction represents a kind of regulative aspect of any possible negation. However, it also contaminates any future violence, because it cannot abolish it once and for all. Nine years after the war, Schmitt once again speaks, as ever, in code and increasingly furtively, about the nihilist potency of the victor.

The human arm holding the atomic bomb [...] in the decisive moment [...] becomes a prosthesis [...] that produces the atomic bomb. The power of the individual power-holder here is merely the secretion of a situation [*die Ausschwitzung einer Situation*], resulting from a system of unpredictably extreme division of labor. (Schmitt 2017, 25; my translation.)<sup>7</sup>

128 What are we reading here? What does *die Ausschwitzung einer Situation* mean? Is it the secretion or the excretion of a situation? This rather rare substantive, *die Ausschwitzung*, is sweating or steaming, a consequence of labor, something that happens after exertion or a great effort; yet, here it is the result of a situation. Of what situation? It is as if *Ausschwitz* is the result of a situation comparable with the discovery of the atomic bomb (which was someone else's discovery). As in the case of nihilism—the allegedly Russian invention according to Leo Strauss—, it seems that across all these moments, nihilism is a reaction or response (always a poor, problematic, insufficient response) to a state of affairs, or attack, or injustice, or evil. Is nihilism then really *en block*, a latent failed response to a given state of affairs, or a situation we encounter? And if so, is it entirely a phenomenon of the second degree? Or is nihilism, on the contrary, something that emerges spontaneously, *held and formed* by pure and infinite negation? This is not just a question of whether being or nothingness came first, or why something rather than nothing.

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7 The German original reads: “Der menschliche Arm, der die Atombombe hält, das menschliche Gehirn, das die Muskeln dieses menschlichen Armes innerviert, ist im entscheidenden Augenblick weniger ein Glied des individuellen Einzelmenschen, als eine Prothese, ein Teil der technischen und sozialen Apparatur, die die Atombombe produziert und zur Anwendung bringt. Die Macht des individuellen Machthabers ist hier nur noch die Ausschwitzung einer Situation, die sich aus einem System unberechenbar übersteigter Arbeitsteilung ergibt.”

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In a letter to Fichte of March 21, 1799, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi mentions the word or concept of *Nihilismus*, equating it at once with idealism, with a protocol that does not respect the existence of an outside world and the world around us, and which is completely blind to reality.<sup>8</sup> If we would translate Jacobi's discovery, harmonizing this "nihilist protocol" with all possible and future transformations of this act—which is never just an act—, perhaps we could arrive at a fictional operation that not only negates the very thing it discovers and sets before itself, but then also ignores it. This is not an ordinary negation without a concept, but, on the contrary, a set of nullifying acts or moments that at the same time establish something new or anticipate a chimera of the new, a new idea, or a new ideal.

This dilemma regarding pure destructive negation or negation for its own sake is later thematized by Hegel in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. Almost certainly this negation is closest to Leo Strauss's vision of Germanic nihilism.<sup>9</sup> Hegel speaks of something that comes close to existing, but does not last, because it is too trivial to subsist for more than a mere gesture or banal fiction. This can be the moment of the negative, but it is without any force of the negative, because it is not twinned with its opposite and the general.<sup>10</sup> Here, then are these fragments, strewn across the section on "The Universal Powers of Action" [*Die allgemeinen Mächte des Handelns*]:

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To the above-mentioned affirmative powers [*affirmative Mächte*] there are at once annexed others opposed to them, the powers, namely, of the negative, the bad and the evil in general. Yet the purely negative [*das bloss Negative*] should not find its place in the ideal presentation of an action as the essential basis of the necessary reaction. The existence of the negative in reality may well correspond with the essence and

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8 "Truly, my dear Fichte, I would not be vexed if you, or anyone else, were to call Chimerism (*Chimärismus*) the view I oppose to the Idealism that I chide for Nichilism." (Jacobi 1995, 519.)

9 In a well-known interview with Emmanuel Levinas, Christoph von Wolzogen, speaking of the "*mauvaise négativité*" from Hegel, "*qui ne sert à rien, qui n'est que négative*," compares it to Auschwitz (cf. Lévinas and Wolzogen 2007, 19).

10 And is, thus, entirely opposite to the force of the negative or *Arbeit des Negativen* or *die Zauberkraft*, which is opposite to *reine Negativität*, as Hegel writes in the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Mind*.

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nature of the negative; but if the inner conception and aim of the agent is null in itself, the inner ugliness, already there, still less permits of true beauty in that conception's real existence. [...] For the purely negative [*nur Negative*] is in itself dull and flat and therefore either leaves us empty or else repels us, whether it be used as the motive of an action or simply as a means for producing the reaction of another motive. [...] Thus the devil in himself is a bad figure, aesthetically impracticable; for he is nothing but the father of lies and therefore an extremely prosaic person. [...] But evil is in general inherently cold and worthless, because nothing comes of it except what is purely negative [*nur Negatives*], just destruction and misfortune, whereas genuine art should give us a view of an inner harmony. (Hegel 1983, 288–289; Hegel 1975, 221–222.)

It is as if this is key to overcoming idealism, that is, nihilism, which really has a regulative function or orientation in the violent change of reality by extreme acts. Simple negation is insufficient, but initiating and necessary.

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