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*Illustratioune vum Gianmarco Liacy*

# Revolutionary Ideas for Counterrevolutionary Times: The Life and Works of Arno J. Mayer<sup>1</sup>

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After the Battle of Valmy Goethe claimed to have told the defeated Prussian officers that “[h]ere and today, a new epoch in the history of the world has begun, and you can boast you were present at its birth.” The great bourgeois revolution that engulfed Europe between 1789 and 1815 was the cataclysm from which modernity sprang. The long nineteenth century – begun by the storming of the Bastille and destroyed by the guns of August 1914 – was the bourgeois century. Industrial capitalism conquered the globe, governance became meritocratic and even democratic, the bourgeois watchwords of science and technology birthed a new era whose consequences we are still living with. If all of this is true, then why was the nineteenth century the height of the old aristocracy’s power in Europe?

I noticed this paradox in 2021 and shared the observation with a friendly former professor. That professor, in turn, gave me his copy of *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (1981) by the late Arno Joseph Mayer (1926-2023). Addressing this same question, Mayer showed his readers and students a different view of the world. *The Old Regime, faced with a far greater threat than Parisian sans-culottes, led Europe and, by colonial extension, the world into the Thirty Years Crisis (1914-1945) in the blind hope that the old order could once again be preserved. The series of catastrophes that followed: two World Wars, the “international defeat of the labor movement,” and the “Judeocide,” are the pieces with which Mayer built his “... reinterpretation of history where ‘dystopia has entirely eclipsed utopia.’”*<sup>2</sup> The Thirty Years Crisis, more than any single national event, is the birthplace of the modern world. It is where the bourgeois epoch truly began, and Arno J. Mayer could have boasted that he was present at its birth.

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1 I would like to thank Yannick Frantz, Daniel Thilman, and Henri Wehenkel for their time and for answering my questions about Arno Mayer and his world. I would like also like to especially thank Henri Wehenkel and Andrew Weeks for reading a draft of this article and providing generous feedback.

2 Fabrice Montebello, “La mort d’Arno Mayer,” *L’Humanité*, January 10, 2024, sec. Tribunes, <https://www.humanite.fr/en-debat/carnet/la-mort-darno-mayer>.



Mayer's body of work did not begin with the nineteenth century. The former student of international relations' first books focused on the diplomacy of the Great War and the Paris peace conferences that followed. But to understand Mayer is to grasp his theory of the twentieth century which, in turn, requires us to begin with the nineteenth.

The debate over the borders of the nineteenth century predates Mayer but revolves around defining the essential character of the century. Much obviously occurred between July 1789 and August 1914, but what is important in the perspective of the *longue durée*? Mayer was open about how *The Persistence of the Old Regime* is a Marxist history.<sup>3</sup> He believed in Marx's historical epochs and incorporated them into his thinking although he found inspiration beyond Marx as well.<sup>4</sup> What made *The Persistence of the Old Regime* notable was its top-down approach. Instead of looking from the bottom up at the rising power of the industrial proletariat, Mayer looked at the forces of the Old Regime that were supposed to be in decline and found that rather than decline, the Old Regime was thriving. Economically, industrial production never overtook rural agriculture and the industrialization that did occur was financed by *both* bourgeois capitalists *and* aristocrats looking to diversify their investments. Politically, the bourgeoisie was still weak. Instead of becoming bourgeois figureheads, monarchs held onto real power and their ministers continued to be aristocrats or ennobled bourgeois, accountable to their monarch instead of parliament. Even in France, home of the great bourgeois revolution and, by 1880, a republic, aristocrats continued to control the officer corps and state bureaucracy as the Dreyfus Affair famously showed.<sup>5</sup>

What about the world of ideas? Mayer saw ideology in everything he wrote because it is the logic that explains why historical actors act the way they do. This is Mayer's addition to Marx's famous line that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please...." Economic factors constrained the choices made by historical actors, yes, but so did their beliefs.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century, those beliefs were both aristocratic and highly undemocratic. Aristocratic in the Old Regime's continued dominance of the "traditional values of preindustrial times;" undemocratic in its embrace of modern ideas for anti-democratic purposes.<sup>7</sup>

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3 Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), x.

4 Henri Wehenkel, "Arno J. Mayer : né à Luxembourg, historien dissident voix de l'autre Amérique," *forum*, May 2004, 45–46 listed Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Bloch, and Mayer's friend Herbert Marcuse as some of his sources of inspiration.

5 Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 102–9.

6 André Loez and Nicolas Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident? Entretien Avec Arno J. Mayer," *Genèses*, no. 49 (2002): 127–28.

7 Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 276.

The Old Regime was still dominant but not unchallenged. Bourgeois-liberal and democratic-socialist ideas were omnipresent among the powerless classes and gaining in strength. By 1914 the Old Regime's power in Europe was beginning to wane. In Germany the imperial and Prussian aristocracy watched the irresistible rise of the SPD with terror. The 1905 Revolution in Russia may have been suppressed, but it left an indelible mark of humiliation on the Tsarist regime. Likewise, the Habsburgs experienced a similar sense of humiliation during negotiations with their nominal Hungarian subjects. The 1914 legislative elections in France resulted in a massive victory for the Left. Italy was gripped by the workers' revolts of the *Settimana rossa* (Red Week) and Britain, that bastion of stability, was in crisis because of the Curragh Mutiny, when British soldiers refused to follow their orders in establishing home rule in Ireland.

Faced with growing threats to their power, the various national Old Regimes could no longer allow themselves to appear weak in foreign affairs, lest they also appear weak domestically. By tying the rise of international tensions to the domestic situation in various European countries, Mayer made one of his most famous arguments: that the origins of the Great War are not just contained in the archives of foreign ministries, but in the domestic politics of the European powers, that it was the primacy of domestic political concerns over the reasons of state that made the Great War possible.<sup>8</sup> But "...in 1914, the intended end-purpose of war was not the diversion or diffusion of dangerous social unrest but the reequilibration of hegemonic bloc and the restabilization of governments."<sup>9</sup> While not the intended effect, the outbreak of the Great War was successful in temporarily arresting the social tensions in the warring states. Political truces (*Burgfrieden*) broke out within the warring powers and socialist parties rushed to demonstrate their loyalty to the national cause. France's socialists, for example, abandoned their prewar pledge not to participate in bourgeois governments because, they argued, the wartime coalition was a "nonparty government" of national defense.<sup>10</sup>

This internal peace to fight an external war – as opposed to an external peace on the edge of civil wars – was the first act of the Thirty Years Crisis. Lasting until 1945, it was the crisis that made the final transition from feudalism to the

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8 Arno J. Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War," in *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn*, ed. Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern (London: Macmillan, 1967), 292–93.

9 Arno J. Mayer, "Internal Crisis and War Since 1870," in *Revolutionary Situations in Europe, 1917–1922: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary. Proceedings, 2nd International Colloquium March 25, 26, 27, 1976*, ed. Charles L. Bertrand (Montréal: Interuniversity Centre for European Studies, 1977), 231.

10 Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), 146.



bourgeois epoch possible, and Mayer showed how the revolutionary energy that had been arrested by the outbreak of war was released by the democratic-socialist explosions of 1917-18.

*Political Origins of New Diplomacy* (1959, published as *Wilson vs. Lenin* in 1963) was Mayer's first book. In it, he demonstrated how the Old Regime finally lost power in Western Europe because of the debates over war aims in the Great War. He does this by showing how before the February Revolution, all the great powers had relegated discussions of war aims to secret discussions between foreign ministries dominated by the representatives of the Old Regime. But the February Revolution, Lenin's April Theses, and the eventual publication of the Entente's secret treaties by the Bolsheviks decisively turned popular opinion in all the warring states against the Old Diplomacy of the Old Regime. The immense sacrifices of the Great War made it impossible to justify sending millions to their deaths for imperial possessions and territorial adjustments. Instead, the Great War had to become a struggle for something greater, the future of the world.

The struggle for the world was not just between Lenin and the Old Regime. Lenin represented those democratic-socialist forces that were now on the move, Woodrow Wilson represented the forces of bourgeois-liberalism. Because Mayer believed in historical materialist eras, the persistence of the Old Regime did not just mean that the working class was denied its power, so too was the liberal bourgeoisie. Wilson's Fourteen Points were both an anti-Old Regime chorus to Lenin's April Theses and a liberal counter to them. Bourgeois-liberals would not allow history to skip them so while the Fourteen Points heralded the triumphant arrival of the new, supposedly democratic, diplomacy, they were also a counterrevolutionary reaction to the democratic-socialist forces unleashed by the October Revolution.

Mayer expanded on this point in his second book, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking* (1967). The sequel to *Wilson vs. Lenin* looks at the reactions of high policymakers to the revolutionary energy unleashed by the end of the Great War. Throughout the Paris peace conferences democratic-socialist revolutionaries rose up across the world and most dramatically in Russia, Germany, and Hungary. These revolutionaries were challenged by an alliance between the meek representatives of the Old Regime and the vigorous forces of bourgeois-liberalism represented by Wilson and, increasingly, Lloyd George.<sup>11</sup> That alliance was dominated by bourgeois-liberal forces who were rapidly achieving their goals and consolidating their gains from the Old Regime:

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<sup>11</sup> For Lloyd George's transition from the Old Regime to bourgeois-liberalism see his January 1918 speech to the Trades Union Congress on Britain's war aims in Mayer, 313-28.

republicanism was on the march and the 1848 dream of a concert of nation-states united by a league of nations was coming true. But, by achieving these aims the forces of bourgeois-liberalism transformed into a counterrevolutionary force. The foreign ministries of the now bourgeois-liberal powers – Britain, France, and the United States – aligned themselves with the forces of the Old Regime in revolutionary Europe – Germany, Hungary, and Russia. In all three cases the ignoble alliance involved the antisemitic and reactionary forces of the Old Regime receiving direct military aid and instruction from bourgeois-liberal representatives: Kolchak in Russia and the Romanian army in Hungary both received military instructions from the French while the SPD famously called upon the *Freikorps* to suppress the Spartacists in Berlin. In all three cases the democratic-socialist revolutionaries were contained and only in Russia was counterrevolution momentarily unsuccessful.

These (counter-)revolutionary years were dramatic but only the first decade of the Thirty Years Crisis. The forces of bourgeois-liberalism had only gained control of the north Atlantic world and while democratic-socialist forces were on the back foot, the revolutionary energy had not entirely dissipated. The Old Regime was also not entirely defeated. Confronted with these new counterrevolutionary dynamics, Mayer attempted to theorize them in his shortest book, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe* (1971).

Mayer observed how both the Old Regime and the bourgeois-liberal order had acted in a variety of counterrevolutionary ways while researching his first two books. From fascism and nationalist strongmen to quasi-parliamentary regimes and presidential dictatorships, Mayer created a theory of counterrevolution in Europe to define the forces arrayed against historical progress and their various characteristics. The book was also a response to Mayer's critics who called him a vulgar Marxist because they saw his descriptions of counterrevolution as simply declaring anyone who was opposed to democratic socialism to be a counterrevolutionary.<sup>12</sup>

In this book, Mayer lays out his theory of the various types of counterrevolutions, how they act, what they look like, and how they fit under the broad, "politically charged," label.<sup>13</sup> Preemptive, posterior, accessory, disguised, anticipatory, externally licensed, and externally imposed counterrevolutions all feature different actors and motivations but share a common origin and goal: to stop and reverse the forces of historical progress.<sup>14</sup> Those who disagree with

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12 Arno J. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytical Framework* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 5–6.

13 Mayer, 2.

14 Mayer, 86–116.



Marx's historical epochs will still find Mayer to be a vulgar Marxist, but his descriptions are nuanced and his work is not predictive but descriptive. The tools Mayer gives us let us come to grips with the Thirty Years Crisis, they do not give any indication of what comes next.

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Mayer placed the Thirty Years Crisis as the true transition from feudalism to capitalism. Inspired by Eric Hobsbawm and Hugh Trevor-Roper's general crisis of the seventeenth century, the Thirty Years Crisis was the result of Mayer's belief in the value of historical comparison.<sup>15</sup> That is why it is sad that, excepting the Holocaust (see below), Mayer only commented sparingly on the subsequent twenty years of crisis. "Had Vichy been the last stand of the counterrevolution dating from 1789, shielded by Nazi Germany?"<sup>16</sup> What about Latin America in this framework?<sup>17</sup>

Piecing together Mayer's comments, I propose my interpretation of the subsequent two decades of crisis as follows. We can see the 1920s and 30s as a struggle between two equally matched counterrevolutionary forces, the Old Regime and bourgeois-liberalism, for control of a world that had been turned upside down by the democratic-socialist revolutions of 1917-23. By the 1930s, the once successful democratic-socialist revolution in the Soviet Union had been contained and tumbled into "terror in one country" to defend its gains rather than export the revolution abroad.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, this conflict transformed into the apocalypse of the century, World War II, in which the Nazi counterrevolution along with the rest of the global Old Regime, went to war with bourgeois-liberalism before embarking on a millenarian Crusade to eradicate Bolshevism.<sup>19</sup> The resulting alliance between the bourgeois-liberal powers and the Soviet Union temporarily broke the latter's isolation, allowing the Soviets to engage in their own counterrevolutionary adventures like the suppression of indigenous antifascist committees in 1945 or crushing the

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15 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 127 & 131 Mayer occasionally nods to this inspiration by also calling the Thirty Years Crisis the "general crisis of the twentieth century." The two labels refer to the same historical transition but with subtle differences.

16 Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 13.

17 Greg Grandin, "History as Containment: An Interview with Arno J. Mayer," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War*, ed. Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 420.

18 Mayer, *The Furies*, 607-702.

19 For the Nazis as counterrevolution see Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe*, 112-13 and Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The "Final Solution" in History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 18.

workers' uprisings in East Berlin and Hungary in 1953 and 1956.<sup>20</sup> In western Europe, the bourgeois-liberal counterrevolution was able to incorporate the former democratic-socialist resistance leaders into the triumphant bourgeois-liberal order. Eventually, the Marshall Plan and other postwar projects stabilized the bourgeois-liberal order in Europe ending, with the help of the Soviet Union, the years of revolutionary turmoil in Europe. By the 1950s the Thirty Years Crisis had passed, and the bourgeois epoch had finally arrived.

This schema poses many questions, but the possibilities Mayer's framework opens make it worthy of good-faith investigations by historians. As it did for studying the end of the Great War, Mayer's framework can provide historians with new insights about their periods and make us fundamentally rethink the meaning of the historical centuries that came before. The Thirty Years Crisis makes us seriously reconsider the ideas of historical materialism by rejecting the common Marxist refrain that we are now entering a period of "late-stage capitalism." Instead, it shows us that the bourgeois epoch is young and that, to quote Mayer, "...neither capitalism nor imperialism were at their peak in 1914 - today that's obvious."<sup>21</sup> What does this mean for the passage of historical time? What does this mean for the activists of our historical era?

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Given the importance of politics in his work, one wonders if it was ever possible for Mayer to *not* be political. Born on 19 June 1926 into the heart of the crisis, Mayer described his father, Franz, as a Zionist with humanist-liberal instincts.<sup>22</sup> This made Arno's home highly political from birth as his father headed Luxembourg's liberal-Zionist organization, mingling and competing with other Zionists in Luxembourg. Eventually, Franz co-founded a *hachshara* – a training camp for those preparing to move to kibbutzim in Palestine – on the French side of the border opposite Altwies.<sup>23</sup> The young Jew Arno did not escape the rising antisemitism of the 20s and 30s. As a young boy, Arno once found himself annoyed by a priest who, however kindly, would loudly repeat the required catechism that "the Jews crucified Jesus!"<sup>24</sup> The Mayers' place on the outskirts of bourgeois Luxembourgish society was formative

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20 It is not for nothing that *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe* is dated 1870 to 1956.

21 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 128.

22 Arno J. Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords: From Zionism to Israel* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), viii.

23 On this point I am indebted to Daniel Thilman who showed me the location of the Altwies *hachshara* and how it was part of a broader organization of *hachsharas* in France.

24 Michel Erpelding and Bernard Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois : Entretien avec Arno J. Mayer, historien américain né en 1926 à Luxembourg, sur l'antijudaïsme dans la cour de récré, la nuit du 10 mai 1940, l'exil new-yorkais, la guerre froide et sur son temps passé avec Wernher von Braun," *forum*, April 2013, 11.



to Arno's Left-humanist instincts. His non-Jewish experiences honed those instincts further. Arno was impacted by a scouting trip to Verdun where he saw the Douaumont Ossuary. At this place of horror his guides gave the scouts a "Wilsonian" speech with a simple message: "this must not happen again."<sup>25</sup>

This Left-humanist life in Luxembourg ended abruptly on the night of 9-10 May 1940. The fourteen-year-old and his family piled into the car moments ahead of the advancing Wehrmacht for the long drive to the Franco-Spanish border.<sup>26</sup> In a voyage that Mayer compared to the film *Casablanca* and with a healthy amount of good luck, the family made their way through Marseilles, north Africa, and Portugal to eventually arrive in New York City. But the society that they arrived in was not a shining city on the hill. Instead, Mayer arrived in America on the eve of the Second Red Scare, a society with its own noxious mixture of racism and antisemitism fusing with an all-pervasive anti-communism to create its own atmosphere of hostility and fear. These were some of the observations that eventually inspired Mayer's most controversial work, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (1988).

Addressing a "...cult of remembrance [that] has become overly sectarian," Mayer pointed out what should be obvious: that the Holocaust – which he called the Judeocide – was an ideological and political event.<sup>27</sup> In summarizing and interpreting the functionalist school of Holocaust historiography, Mayer saw the murder of six million European Jews as the ultimate culmination of counterrevolutionary violence in the Thirty Years Crisis. He demonstrated that while the Nazis and their collaborators were divided over the "Jewish Question," "[b]y grafting their Jew-baiting onto their anti-bolshevism, the Nazis attempted to make their anti-Semitism appear less eccentric and more politically grounded," appeasing moderates in the Old Regime.<sup>28</sup> Because the bourgeois-liberalism of the Cold War was steeped in a totalizing anti-communism just as the Old Regime during the Thirty Years Crisis had been, Mayer held up an ugly picture of the world he came from that had disturbing similarities to the society immigrated to. What would it say about the bourgeois-liberal regime if the violence of the Holocaust was not just the result of a uniquely vile outpouring of long-forgotten antisemitism but also the result of a failed anti-communist crusade? What would it mean if the Holocaust was not just an antisemitic, but also an *anti-communist*, event?

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25 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 126–27.

26 He recounts the details of the story in both Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, vii–xi and Erpelding and Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois," 12–13.

27 Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, 16.

28 Mayer, 148.

This does not deny the antisemitic character of the Holocaust. Mayer chose to call the murder of six million Jews the “Judeocide” to emphasize that the victims were mostly Jewish and targeted for being Jews. The Nazis saw their ultimate enemy as Judeo-Bolshevism because in the Nazi imagination they were two sides of the same coin, to be Jewish was to be a Bolshevik, and to be a Bolshevik was to be under the total control of the Jews. But Mayer also contextualized the Holocaust. Reflecting on his own experiences, Mayer wrote that he was

...aware that the impact of the Jewish catastrophe was not altogether democratic, in that the odds for survival were unequal. Throughout much of the Continent, including Luxembourg, Yiddish-speaking, unprosperous, politically conservative, and religiously Orthodox Jews had a considerably smaller chance of remaining alive than more assimilated, privileged, and less religious Jews.<sup>29</sup>

That the Mayers escaped at all is relevant. Among his close bourgeois family, only his maternal grandfather died in the Holocaust. The rest of his family, except his maternal grandparents, was able to escape because they had been forewarned, had access to a car, savings, spoke French, and came from Western Europe. His maternal grandparents could have gone as well, but because of their age, they *chose* to stay. Although, as Mayer points out, letting Jews “escape” was Nazi policy until September 1939. The SS even used the confiscated wealth of bourgeois Jews to fund the emigration of poor Jews. It was only after the immense gains of Operations Barbarossa when the countries to which millions of Jews had fled fell into Nazi arms that debate over a new Jewish policy began inside the SS.

It was the military disaster that resulted from the invasion of the Soviet Union that made the Holocaust possible. The Nazis, with the help of the rest of the counterrevolutionary Old Regime across Europe furiously set upon the Soviet Union, eager to destroy the state that had been created when the Russian counterrevolution failed. Mayer understood this conflict in the context of the medieval crusades which “...served to turn internal ideological stirrings and social tensions against an external enemy. There was no clear and present danger from afar, since Moslem ideas or zealots were not about to sweep over the European heartland.”<sup>30</sup> The same was true of the Soviet Union which had

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29 Mayer, x.

30 Mayer, 24.



stopped exporting the revolution in the 1930s. The Nazi war against the Soviet Union was another *Glaubenskrieg* which was why “Europe’s second epoch of general crisis and war [became] so uniquely violent...” and why, when the Old Regime’s crusade against Bolshevism failed, the external violence turned inward against Europe’s Jews.<sup>31</sup>

The violence visited upon Europe’s Jews was the direct result of the failure of the Nazi crusade against the Soviet Union. This is the critical argument of Mayer’s book: because the would-be conquerors of the Soviet Union had failed in their efforts to eradicate Bolshevism abroad, they attempted to make victory come to fruition by eradicating the forces of Bolshevism within their grasp, Europe’s Jews. It is also why Mayer did not dwell on the pornography of suffering prevalent in other histories of the Holocaust. He focused, instead, on the meaning of the violence and why it occurred. It is also why Mayer did not use footnotes throughout the book. His book is well-researched, and his bibliography shows his knowledge of the subject but nowhere in it does he introduce new information or deny established facts. Like *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, Mayer chose to not use footnotes to emphasize the book’s interpretive questions rather than argue over the factual truth of specific events.<sup>32</sup>

Arno Mayer’s great skill was his analytical thinking. Rather than searching for discreet facts in forgotten archives, Mayer believed in comparing and contrasting historical epochs, places, and events for themes that help us understand the world today. His penchant for comparison came, in part from the pan-European point of view his Luxembourgish origins instilled in him. In 2002 he told two interviewers that “...to write a national history of Luxembourg is absurd, when you think of the way this country has been shaped and nourished culturally. Coming from a small nation forces you to look elsewhere....”<sup>33</sup> Mayer’s years in the United States transformed him from a Luxembourger into a European. Surrounded by Americans his Luxembourgish nuances disappeared and were replaced by the image of a cosmopolitan European. Mayer encouraged that image of himself, saying in 2010 that

When you are born and raised in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, you can only laugh at the notion of national history. The dialect I grew up with is not even a written language. So from the

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31 In Mayer, 31 Mayer translates *Glaubenskrieg* as “doctrinal war” but the term is normally rendered into English as “war of religion.” The ambiguity of the term is part of what makes the comparison so fruitful.

32 Mayer made this point succinctly in *Plowshares into Swords*, xiv.

33 Loez and Offenstadt, “Un Historien Dissident?,” 127.

beginning I had a wider view of Europe.... No matter what subject I would think about, it made no sense to think in Luxembourgian terms.<sup>34</sup>

Mayer did not abandon Luxembourg by embracing a “wider view of Europe,” rather he believed that to stubbornly hold onto one part of the world was to shut oneself off from the knowledge to be found in comparison. For Mayer, those “Luxembourgian terms” could have been any national terms. Luxembourg gave Mayer the linguistic tools and critical mind to go beyond national boundaries and analyze the trends and forces that impact our world. His mind was analytical, and he refused to limit himself to any one national history.

Mayer’s analytical mind is also what led him to compare the violence of the French and Russian revolutions in *The Furies* (2000). Inspired and frustrated by the commentary surrounding the bicentennial of the French Revolution, Mayer set out as a critical and independent left voice to understand the violent outbursts of both revolutionary moments. He did not seek to defend the outbursts but to contextualize and understand them. The Jacobin and Bolshevik terrors took place in the context of civil and international war, but Mayer did not cite war to excuse terror, rather he observed where they impacted revolutionary violence, and importantly, where they did not.

Coming on the heels of *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, *The Furies* strikes the reader as a continued examination of the violence meted out to Europe’s Jews following the failed Nazi crusade against Bolshevism. This did not mean that he thought the two extremes of the ideological spectrum were the same. He wrote the exact opposite in 1971 and was especially critical of bourgeois-liberalism for believing in its own bloodlessness.<sup>35</sup> What these outbreaks of violence share is that they are moments of ideologically charged internal and external war, state and religious terror, and violence and vengeance in the countryside. *The Furies* does not argue that there was a side of angels and another of devils, but that revolutions are conflicts between two sides with incompatible ideological beliefs.

This also does not mean Mayer was neutral in these historical struggles. Indeed, he complained about a “[t]erminal metastasis [that] enables ... scholars to avoid not only differentiating but also choosing between revolution and counterrevolution.”<sup>36</sup> In both the French and Russian revolutions he supported the side of historical progress because he believed that side was in the right, but this did not stop him from criticizing the side he supported. These are the

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34 Grandin, “History as Containment,” 419.

35 Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe*, 2 and Mayer, *The Furies*, 21.

36 Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe*, 32.



politics that pervade Mayer's works. We should not be surprised by them given the United States he found himself in on the eve of the Cold War.

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Back in 1944, Mayer was an American success story. Joe, the young Jewish immigrant in Washington Heights, became a naturalized citizen and enlisted in the Army. It was there that "the intellectual fuck" saw the ugly face of American racism and personally experienced hostility because of his Jewishness and Left-wing politics.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, the Army found the Luxembourger's language skills more useful than his ability to drive a tank and made him Wernher von Braun's moral officer. Moral officers were little more than servants for the high-value individuals captured at the end of World War II. With the Cold War just around the corner, Mayer was told not to contradict his new master and keep him happy. Despite these orders, Mayer recounted a moment when von Braun told him that "Hitler had made but one error: killing the Jews," to which Mayer, von Braun's "*kleiner Judenbube*," shouted back "You know perfectly well that if you and your colleagues were in Moscow, you would say: 'we made but one mistake, attacking the Soviet Union!'"<sup>38</sup> Mayer had come face to face with the Cold War.

The Cold War defined Mayer's career. He attended Yale in the heart of the McCarthy era and kept a low profile, although not without worrying his advisors. In 1952 he applied for a visa to Moscow but was stopped by two professors who realized the danger, not of what could happen in the Soviet Union, but of the possible *New York Times* headline: "Yale Graduate Attends Communist Meeting."<sup>39</sup> Instead of going to Moscow, Mayer traveled to India and campaigned for the socialist leader Ram Lohia in Kerala before returning to the United States for a job at Brandies.<sup>40</sup> Later, in 1958, Mayer was hired by Harvard but was confronted with a dreaded loyalty oath before he could take up the post. Mayer did not hide the fact that he signed it, but he felt the need to

justify his actions to protect his career, "It wasn't that it was a regime of terror. It wasn't that, but the atmosphere was... very heavy."<sup>41</sup>

By the 1960s Mayer had a permanent position at Princeton and publications

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37 Erpelding and Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois," 14. Henri Wehenkel confirmed this to me as well during our conversations about his friend.

38 Erpelding and Thomas, 15.

39 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 137.

40 Grandin, "History as Containment," 418-19.

41 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 135 and; Erpelding and Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois," 15.

to boast of. His dissident Marxist politics had left him unaffiliated but not apolitical. Reflecting on these years much later, Mayer said that he wanted to find a place between Lenin and Wilson, Moscow and Washington. He wanted to find the place once inhabited by Jaurès or Blum.<sup>42</sup> During these years he also wrote of himself as "...a confirmed Leftist critic of those Allied and American policies, both foreign and domestic, that condoned or advanced, intentionally or unintentionally, the counterrevolutionary side in the era of the communist revolution."<sup>43</sup> Above all, he believed things could be better. This led him and several anti-war students to block the doors to the Institute of Defense Analyses in 1970 to protest the Vietnam War. For his troubles, Mayer spent the night in jail.<sup>44</sup>

Mayer was also a Zionist, albeit a dissident one. In 1950, he worked on the *kibbutz* in Ein HaShofet, following through on his father's ambitions.<sup>45</sup> But Mayer came to despise the Israel that actually existed, observing how his and other *kibbutzim* were in suspiciously strategic locations and how even his Left-socialist comrades were always armed, he simply "...found this separatist Jewish subculture alienating."<sup>46</sup> Mayer began reading dissident Zionist voices advocating for a binational state that would share the holy land with Palestinians. These voices were tragically ignored in favor of Jewish supremacists and orthodox Jewish extremists which Mayer laid out in his last book, *Plowshares into Swords* (2008).

Mayer never became an anti-Zionist, but he came to despise the Israel that existed in his lifetime. In his last book, Mayer discussed the origins of Zionism and its historical context to demonstrate the obvious paradox: yes, it is a colonial project that only had eyes for European Jews, but it was also a secular and republican project in the era of the Old Regime. Mayer believed that despite this paradox these utopian origins could have created a democratic and egalitarian society better than what came before. The key theme of *Plowshares into Swords* is how the secular and humanist voices were "retroactively marginalized as dreamers" and drowned out by "... an unholy alliance of religious true believers and secular ultra-nationalists"

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42 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 125.

43 Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe*, 1.

44 Loez and Offenstadt, "Un Historien Dissident?," 137–38; Erpelding and Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois," 16; and Wehenkel, "Arno J. Mayer," 46.

45 Franz, now going by Frank, and his mother Ida returned to Luxembourg in 1959 when Frank was named the Honorary Consul General of Israel to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. In 1936 his father had considered emigrating to Palestine but his mother vetoed the plan because of the violence at the time, that violence was part of what Mayer called the "second Intifada." See Erpelding and Thomas, "Itinéraire d'un exilé luxembourgeois," 12; Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords*, ix.

46 Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords*, x.



who “Judaized” and militarized civil and political society.<sup>47</sup> Mayer believed in a binational confederation rather than a two-state solution, but still wrote with fury about how “... only from a teleological perspective can a two-state solution be said to have been inevitable.”<sup>48</sup> His book demonstrates how it was made impossible by Jewish supremacists and *haredim* (ultra-orthodox Jewish) extremists, the heirs of Vladimir Jabotinsky, who headed his call for “...an ‘iron wall’ of overwhelming military strength to break the Arabs.”<sup>49</sup>

Quoting another humanist voice, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Mayer argued that “To occupy Arab territories, let alone conquer them, would be to destroy Israel ‘morally,’ transforming its state into an instrument of ‘domination and repression.’”<sup>50</sup> He then showed how this “moral destruction” manifests itself in Israel with the threat of imprisonment of internal dissenters and Israeli-Arab citizens.<sup>51</sup> Looking back at *The Furies*, Mayer never denied the use of terrorism by Palestinians but he did not believe that meant Zionist Jews and Palestinians share equally in the responsibility for the violence that has led to the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza today. He wrote with disdain of how “[e]mbracing an ideological essentialism and determinism, these anti-temporal ‘intentionalists’ beat out the minority of historicist ‘functionalists,’ who take account of not only the text but the context of the Palestinian fury.”<sup>52</sup> In *Plowshares into Swords* Mayer argued for his belief that there was a humanist Zionism that could have created a binational, secular, state. He had total contempt for those who turned Israel from “a beacon unto the world” into “arguably a terror or rogue state.”<sup>53</sup>

Mayer’s fury for what Israel became was also fueled, in part, by his righteous hatred for the American empire. Over the course of his life, Mayer saw his father’s dream of a secular and humanist Israel replaced by a Jewish-supremacist outpost for American imperial interests.<sup>54</sup> Despite claiming not to think in “Luxembourgian terms” Mayer had a deep sympathy for those in small and ignored states. He was “acutely perturbed by Israel’s refusal to recognize that its future lies neither with its God nor its sword, but with the concert of world and regional powers.”<sup>55</sup> It was the same criticism he leveled against

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47 Mayer, 7, 12, 16–18, 35–38. Also see pages 33–39 for an example of Israel’s Right-wing drift through Jerusalem’s three mayors before 2008. Pages 78–79 also contain Mayer’s comments on Israel’s religious drift and how the extreme political beliefs and religious interpretations of ultra-Orthodox Jews are subsidized by the state.

48 Mayer, 7.

49 Mayer, 8–9. For more on Jabotinsky see pages 123–127.

50 Mayer, 40.

51 Mayer, 38–40 & 75.

52 Mayer, 26.

53 Mayer, 32–33.

54 Mayer, 79–84.

55 Mayer, xiii.

the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when he wrote that "... since 1947, [America is] the pioneer and principal agent of 'pre-emptive' state terror, exercised exclusively in the Third World and, consequently, in the midst of almost general indifference."<sup>56</sup> Mayer saw Israel as the continued beneficiary of the "...open-ended war on terror. This is the third phase of the American war to make the world safe for democracy—a crusade started during the First World War and resumed during the Second World War in the form of the Cold War, until 1988-90."<sup>57</sup>

Mayer had witnessed the McCarthyite era and had to endure Wernher von Braun's two-faced justifications. By the 1970s Mayer found himself so revolted by the war in Vietnam he was willing to go to jail over it. Is it any wonder that Mayer sympathized with the victims of the American Empire? Is it any wonder that Mayer sympathized not only with the victims of the Old Regime but of this new bourgeois-liberal order?

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Mayer's analytical genius and courageous political stances might not have earned him a place in the "pantheon of Luxembourgers", but it made him an inspiration to the newest generation of Left academics around the world.<sup>58</sup> The academics of this new anti-capitalist Left – based around organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, Corbyn's Labour, *La France insoumise*, or *Die Linke* – find inspiration in Mayer's works. One of these anti-capitalist left intellectuals, Enzo Traverso, wrote an unmatched summation of Mayer's four "rules" for studying history on the eve of his death.<sup>59</sup> Corey Robin, an author in the *New Left Review*, knew Mayer personally and wrote about both the intellectual and the man.<sup>60</sup>

Arno J. Mayer died on 17 December 2023 in Princeton, New Jersey. He was buried on 18 February 2024 at the Jewish cemetery *Belle-vue* in Limpertsberg. I never knew Arno Mayer; therefore, this is not an obituary for a man who was a friend, husband, and father of two. This is an obituary for a lifetime of critical work. In the *longue* or even just the *moyenne durée*, a human life is but an instant. But an idea can last for centuries. Mayer's critical mind furnished us with a new understanding of world history. There are works that Mayer

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56 Arno J. Mayer, "Reflexiones Intempestivas," trans. María Rosa Borrás, *Mientras Tanto*, no. 82 (2001): 34.

57 Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords*, 82.

58 Wehenkel, "Arno J. Mayer," 44.

59 Enzo Traverso, "Arno J Mayer's 20th Century," *New Statesman*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2023/12/arno-j-mayer-twentieth-century>.

60 Corey Robin, "Without End," *NLR/Sidecar* (blog), December 31, 2023, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/without-end>.



never completed, his planned sequel to *The Persistence of the Old Regime* transformed into *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* while his planned memoir was shelved in favor of *Plowshares into Swords*.<sup>61</sup> In 1989, Maurice Agulhon invited Mayer to Paris to lecture on the Old Regime in the interwar period. Those lectures transformed into *The Furies*.<sup>62</sup> Mayer's ideas have been left unfinished. It is our job to pick up where he left off.

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61 Mayer, *The Furies*, xiii and; Mayer, *Plowshares into Swords*, xii.

62 Mayer, *The Furies*, xv–xvi.