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# The Swiss National Socialist Ideology of Max Leo Keller: A Discourse Analytical Study

Peter Bakumov

## Abstract

Max Leo Keller was a well-known Frontist and a political leader in the Swiss far-right movement during the period from 1933 to 1945. He is occasionally mentioned in existing historiography, but his personality remains understudied. His views present a curious mixture of certain aspects of Swiss identity that is heavily influenced by German National Socialism. The current study is based on historical-sociological research, conducted with the help of computer software and discourse theory and designed to explore the motivation behind Keller's actions and summarize his explanations and reasoning. In summary, we present the ideological structure of the version of Swiss National Socialism formed in this particular case.

Far-right movements in Switzerland gained momentum during the «Frontist springtime» of 1933.<sup>1</sup> A large number of organizations focusing on the «overhaul» of Swiss social, economic and political life emerged. The «revolutionary» agenda became the main differentiating point of the Frontists from the right conservative forces. Despite the fact that the Frontists did not achieve electoral success, they influenced public discourse. The response to their far-right agenda included legal restrictions on political activities as well as the cultural campaign of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung* («spiritual national defense»), a phenomenon which united various political forces to bolster an anti-totalitarian spirit and stimulated identity-building.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of the Swiss population viewed German National Socialism and Italian Fascism critically, but it is quite difficult to estimate their acceptance of the far-right agenda. The looming threat of the *Überfremdung* (inundation of foreigners), the fear of socialism born out of the bloody suppression of the federal strike of 1918, and strong anti-Semitic sentiments were widespread among the Swiss population.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz. Die Geschichte der Frontenbewegung in der deutschen Schweiz 1930–1945*, Zürich 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Mooser notes that the signification of «spiritual defence» was contested between conservative, liberal, and socialist forces even before National Socialists seized power in Germany. However, it is after 1933 that it acquired a common focal point, namely, the anti-totalitarian cause. Josef Mooser, *Die «Geistige Landesverteidigung» in den 1930er Jahren. Profile und Kontexte eines vielschichtigen Phänomens der schweizerischen politischen Kultur in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 47 (1997), pp. 685–709.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Kury, *Über Fremde reden. Überfremdungsdiskurs und Ausgrenzung in der Schweiz 1900–1945*, Zürich 2000; Jacques Picard, *Die Schweiz und die Juden 1933–1945. Schweizerischer Antisemitismus, jüdische Abwehr und internationale Migrations- und Flüchtlingspolitik*, Zürich 1997.

At the same time, Nazi Germany viewed Switzerland as a zone of interest. German propaganda aimed to undermine Swiss sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> The obvious threat from authoritarian regimes to Swiss democracy peaked in 1940 when Switzerland found itself surrounded by Axis states. Direct military intervention did not occur, but the Third Reich was interested in establishing a friendly regime in Switzerland, ruled by its sympathizers or even collaborators. In 1940, federal president Marcel Pilet-Golaz met three leading Frontists to discuss a possible shift toward «German-friendly neutrality», which in fact would have turned Switzerland into an auxiliary state.<sup>5</sup> One of these Frontists was Dr. Max Leo Keller, a prominent engineer and an ardent advocate of national socialist ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Max Leo Keller was born in Zurich in 1897 where he also obtained primary and middle-school education. In 1914, Keller, who was now 17 years old, enlisted as a military volunteer and joined the reserve.<sup>7</sup> Despite the unfortunate nationwide events that accompanied the federal strike in 1918, he managed to complete his professional study as an electrical engineer at the college of Winterthur in that year. Later, Keller studied engineering and economy and took courses in law and history in Zurich, Bern, and Darmstadt (Germany).<sup>8</sup> His young years were not characterized by political activities but rather by hard work that would enable him to build a career. In 1922, he went to the USA to get additional experience in the local electrical network. He remained there for three years, working for big industry. In 1925, he became the youngest full member of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers.<sup>9</sup> He returned to Switzerland as a representative of American Brown Boveri Electric Corp., an American company and was tasked with the establishment and maintenance of a connection between the Swiss and American branches of the company. Later, the Swiss branch closed, and Keller took a position in Philadelphia Electric Co., another American company. He participated in the construction of the Conowingo Dam, a large hydroelectric project near Maryland. He consulted Germans in electrical projects, and these Germans gave him the nickname «Mozart of electrical engineering».<sup>10</sup> In 1929, he finally returned to Switzerland – this time to remain. He

4 In the early years of NSDAP rule, propaganda worked subtly, mainly underlining the Germanic heritage of the Swiss in school and history books or in newspapers. With the beginning of World War II, Hitler considered both annexation and an auxiliary state model. The propagandistic materials glorifying such a perspective crossed the border and were distributed with the help of pro-German Frontists. See: Jürg Fink, *Die Schweiz aus der Sicht des Dritten Reiches, 1933–1945*, Zürich 1985.

5 Catherine Arber, *Frontismus und Nationalsozialismus in der Stadt Bern. Viel Lärm, aber wenig Erfolg*, in: *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 65 (2003), pp. 3–63.

6 The words in the collocation «national socialism» are started with uppercase letters when meaning German National Socialism; in any other case, lowercase writing is preferred.

7 *Archiv für Zeitgeschichte* (AfZ), NL M.L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 100.

8 AfZ, NL M.L. Keller / 11, «Beruflicher Lebenslauf von Dr. Max Leo Keller».

9 AfZ, NL M.L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 111.

10 AfZ, NL M.L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 117.

worked as a consulting engineer in Aarau and started to occupy himself with local economic projects, while at the same time receiving doctoral education. In 1931, he was awarded the first prize from the national economic division of the juristic faculty of the University of Bern.<sup>11</sup> In the same year, he obtained a doctoral degree. Around this time, he developed a theoretical background for the nationalization of the Swiss energy industry and sought support for the project, but in vain. Both his publication efforts and political lobbyism failed. From 1932 to 1939, Keller was the chief of an agency promoting local businesses. The agency was created with the help of the Bern government in order to tackle local unemployment. Regions, which predominantly produced watches, needed diversification of local production. Keller was a perfect fit for the position since he was not only qualified in his own field but had also received postgraduate education as an economist.

In 1939, he left the government agency to start his own business. Around this time, authorities began to become interested in his political activities and initiated a prosecution. In 1941, Keller was invited to Berlin to become a consulting engineer in electricity supply in the «allied» economic system (meaning, probably, also occupied territories), and to conduct foreign negotiations with Romania about natural gas. In 1944, Keller was appointed as a high-ranking manager in the airplane production sector; a short time later, he received «unlimited financing and unrestricted powers» for this position.<sup>12</sup> He claimed that he was successful in completing his building and production plan; however, the project could not be finished because of the end of the war. To sum up, he was quite useful to the German war effort in terms of his professional skills.

In existing historiography, Max Leo Keller is primarily known as a leader of *Nationale Bewegung der Schweiz* (NBS) and is usually mentioned in connection with it.<sup>13</sup> More recent studies also shed light on his close interaction with high SS authorities and explore instances of his cooperation with them.<sup>14</sup> The Swiss government declared him a traitor who had violated national independence and territorial sovereignty. He was tried after the war, found guilty, and sentenced for crimes against the state.

With the present research, we aim to contribute to the exploration of the understudied case of Max Leo Keller, uncover new factual data, and provide a sociological picture of his views. The history of Frontism lacks a sociological perspective, and a deficiency of the study of Frontism's ideology is one part of this lack. At the same time, the results of our study as well as its methodology and structure may provide a theoretical framework for further case-related investigations in the field of historical sociology.

11 Ibid., p. 119.

12 AfZ, NL M.L. Keller / 11, «Beruflicher Lebenslauf von Dr. Max Leo Keller».

13 Horst Zimmermann, *Die Schweiz und Grossdeutschland*, München 1980.

14 Martin Gutmann, *Building a Nazi Europe. The SS's Germanic Volunteers*, Cambridge 2019.

Max Leo Keller, a far-right intellectual, came from a rather wealthy family, received good education, and was professionally capable; as a political leader, his actions were observed both in Switzerland and in Germany throughout the history of Swiss Frontism (1933 to 1945). A talented, educated person with a Swiss identity and a history of collaboration with the German regime presents a specific case whose logic we have yet to reveal.

We are not treating National Socialism in terms of a generic fascism variant or even a «fascist minimum». Our fascism research is mainly based on modern culture-oriented approaches advocated by Stanley Payne and Roger Griffin.<sup>15</sup> In our analysis, we will focus on the «mythical core» of the far-right ideology expressed in goals and values and attitudes toward the Other. Not less important would be the ideological filter through which Keller viewed fascist movements in other countries and how he saw the Swiss role on the international arena. We define «National Socialism» in this regard explicitly to distinguish the case of Keller from that of Frontists with Fascist tendencies (meaning French- and Italian-speaking Frontists) and to suggest an implicit focus on the segregation and elimination of «the Other» implied by German National Socialism.

Gerring defines ideology as «idea-elements that are bound together and that belong to one another in a non-random fashion».<sup>16</sup> In accordance with this definition, we, above all, recognize that an ideology is a coherent set of views logically interrelated with each other. This logic may be constructed arbitrarily and subjectively, and it is our task to identify it. Freeden used the term «individual ideologies» to point out how political leaders and prominent personalities leave «their own imprint» when articulating political views.<sup>17</sup> Thus the term «individual ideologies» is perfectly suitable for the present study.

In the empirical part, we are going to combine several methodological approaches to achieve clear and verifiable results. First, we process the gathered primary sources according to the list of preliminary codes we have selected. Second, we apply the qualitative methodology of discourse theory to interpret the search results.

The primary sources were gathered from two archives, the *Archiv für Zeitgeschichte* (AfZ, Zürich) and the *Schweizerische Bundesarchiv* (BAR, Bern), in entries sorted by name «M. L. Keller». Most documents were gathered from Keller's personal archive, the *Nachlass M. L. Keller*. The base of the text corpus comprises of the documents found in the AfZ and the BAR as well as the entire

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Payne, *Geschichte des Faschismus. Aufstieg und Fall einer europäischen Bewegung*, München 2001; Roger Griffin, *The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 37/1 (2002), pp. 21–43.

<sup>16</sup> John Gerring, *Ideology: A Definitional Analysis*, in: *Political Research* 50/4 (1997), p. 980, 983, 984.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, Oxford 1996, p. 106.



*Nachlass*.<sup>18</sup> Afterwards, they were manually sorted, leaving out those unrelated to Keller's personality (for instance, his collection of Frontist leaflets or articles) or those thematically irrelevant (for example, manuscripts on engineering).

The resulting corpus was then subjected to an optical text recognition process and uploaded onto *ATLAS.ti* 8. In the program, the data corpus was coded with the help of an open coding approach based on secondary literature about Frontism and national socialism.<sup>19</sup> During secondary coding, irrelevant codes were omitted since they provided an insufficient number of search instances that would be useful in the analysis, while others were added.<sup>20</sup>

Each key signifier was then separated into a thesaurus for the empirical analysis. For instance, one key signifier (communism) had a number of synonyms (Marxism and Bolshevism). The search was conducted with the minimum number of letters possible to preserve the word root, so that a maximal number of linguistic derivatives appeared in the search results.

| Key signifier | Word cloud   |
|---------------|--|
| Nation        | Nation(-), national  |
| Democracy     | Demokratie, demokratisch   |
| Independence  | Unabhängigkeit, unabhängig   |
| Defense       | Verteidigung, (geistige) Landesverteidigung, verteidigen   |
| Switzerland   | Schweiz, schweizerisch, Eidgenossenschaft, Eidgenossen, eidgenössisch  |
| Jews          | Juden(-), jüdisch  |
| Communists    | Kommunismus, kommunistisch, Bolschewismus, bolschewistisch, Marxismus, marxistisch, Klassenkampf, klassenkämpferisch |
| Liberals      | Liberalismus, liberal(-)   |
| Freemasonry   | Freimaurer, freimaurerisch   |
| New Order     | Neuordnung, neue Ordnung   |
| Europe        | Europa, (pan-)Europa, europäisch, Abendland, abendländisch   |
| Reich         | Reich  |
| Germanic      | Germanisch   |
| Germany       | Deutschland, deutsch   |

<sup>18</sup> The *Nachlass* predominantly includes protocols and documents related to the court process. The first period (before 1941) comprises various documents, texts, and letters. The written text of defence composed by Keller was the main source of his views in the second period (after 1941) of the empirical analysis. Its bias is balanced by including prosecution-related documents in the sample.

<sup>19</sup> The discourse of National Socialism is based on a set of signifiers and stereotypes known through detailed research in the post-war years until the present day and provides ground for the preliminary coding. Such signifiers as «people» (*Volk*), «nation» (*Nation*), and «blood» (*Blut*) constituted the identity of National Socialism. These signifiers opposed ideological and racial «enemies»: «Jews» (*Juden*), «communists» (*Kommunisten*), «traitors» (*Verräter*). Signifiers constructing self-identification as well as those limiting it were crucial for the formation of the wholesome National Socialist discourse.

<sup>20</sup> For example, «Fascism», a code which should uncover an admiration (or criticism) towards a fascist regime or ideology, was virtually ignored in Keller's articulation.

| Key signifier      | Word cloud  |
|--------------------|---|
| Annexation         | Anschluss (-)   |
| National Socialism | Nationalsozialismus, nationalsozialistisch              |
| Race               | Rasse(-), rassistisch                                   |
| Blood              | Blut(-)   |
| Aryan              | Arier, arisch, nordisch                                 |
| Hitler             | Hitler (-)  |
| Frontism           | Frontismus, Frontisten, frontistisch, (Nationale) Front |
| Overhaul           | Erneuerung, erneuern                                    |

After each use of these signifiers is identified, we turn to the second step, namely, to the process of interpretation using the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>21</sup> We look into each use of a signifier and its context. We interpret these instances and conclude about their articulated meanings.

In the theory of Laclau and Mouffe, discursive «elements» represent possible meanings of a signifier. According to the poststructuralist approach, texts and terms do not simply result in a meaning but rather contain an everlasting struggle between meanings. Elements are differentiated since they offer a distinctive meaning to the same signifier, but they all have, to some extent, an equivalence to the signifier, or, to put it in other words, a connection to it. Elements used in the particular discourse are called «moments». When the connections between moments are layered, their meaning becomes relatively fixed. However, the discourse can never become fully stabilized.

In order to stabilize a discourse, nodal points or master-signifiers emerge. In National Socialist ideology, they are easily identifiable. National Socialism is based upon the idea of a common origin that is primordial and inseparable. National Socialist ideology attributes special qualities and significance to common skin color, highlighting a cultural basis, including language and biological external characteristics against the alien Other. Antagonism against the Other constituted the so-called national (or «folkish») community as National Socialists saw it: «a healthy popular body» (*Volkskörper*), standing against «degeneracy» and «weakness» of liberal communities as well as against «evil», «foreign», and «inhumane» communist communities. Not only did a political regime simply oppose others but ideology opposed ideology.

The moments in a discourse may be arbitrarily connected by an articulator to prove a viewpoint. When meanings become equivalently united, they form a «chain of equivalence». When they are posed antagonistically, they form a «chain of difference». These arrangements of moments can be used for several goals such as to exclude an antagonized discourse or to stigmatize a group.

21 Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, New York 1985; Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek*, Oxford 1999.

Keller acted as an articulator who attempted to reconstruct and renegotiate Swiss national identity in order to adapt it to National Socialism. We did not try to determine the importance of Keller's views in Swiss discourse since we do not possess enough sources or an effective methodology to conduct such an analysis. With the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, we aimed to identify moments, nodal points, and chains of equivalence in his articulation.

## The ideology of Max Leo Keller before 1941

Pre-National Socialist publications of Keller contain traces of National Socialist thought that are moderately nationalist; however, this thought was never expressed in the way that it was after National Socialists seized power in Germany and became internationally relevant. Keller referred to «common good», «national interest», and «the people» even in the earliest documents we managed to gather. In his seminal work «Swiss energy economy», Keller advocated the advantages of communitarianism over individualism and «common good» over private interests.<sup>22</sup> No definition to these collocations was provided, and they acted as empty signifiers present in the articulation.

An early event related to Keller's career may have pushed him into the far-right milieu. At the time, his articulation contained no traces of a pro-German renegade attitude. We reconstructed the whole story of this event to disclose possible reasons for Keller's further inclination to the right. The event showed that Keller's intention was patriotic, and the economic project he drafted as a professional in his own field was motivated by a desire to improve wellbeing life of the nation. Nationalist connotations were limited in the texts as well as in the correspondence related to the event.

The aforementioned early event is this: Keller proposed the nationalization of the Swiss energy industry and the sale of bonds to employed people (workers and civil servants). A newly established agency would oversee and control the process and forbid foreign interference. The project was approved by prominent academic figures, including Walter Kummer, a professor at ETH Zurich, who claimed that Keller's theory was backed by international experience.<sup>23</sup> Another supporter of Keller's project was Richard König, a professor at the University of Bern. In correspondence with Pilet-Golaz, he proposed to establish an expert commission to subject Keller's data to investigation.<sup>24</sup> Keller also received supp-

<sup>22</sup> While most of the professional articles written by Keller contained only technical information, the work on the Swiss energy industry manifested a demand to change the national economy in accordance with personal views. Max Keller, *Schweizerische Energiewirtschaft. Die Notwendigkeit und volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung einer einheitlichen Planwirtschaft für die schweizerische Elektrizitätsversorgung*, Aarau 1931, pp. 1–2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, Dr. Richard König an Ständerat Schöpfer 1932, p. 10.



ort from Robert Schöpfer of the Federal Council of States, who stated that private energy companies' lobby «would banish anyone from the country» who had such a project in mind.<sup>25</sup> In further correspondence dating to 1933, Schöpfer supported Keller when one former energy lobbyist, Professor Walter Wyssling, surprisingly changed sides and began to promote Keller's ideas as his own.<sup>26</sup> Keller was outraged and used his contacts to make the case public.

Of course, Keller's project was rejected by representatives of private energy companies. Keller had carried out the analysis as an engineer, ignoring the economic implications. In practice, the private companies, which had invested their capital to produce energy and compete on the market, saw the project as a danger to their existence.

In summary, Keller's economic project, backed by scientific data, was rejected; the larger public remained unaware of his effort. Much later, during a trial, the independent and patriotic nature of his project was recognized by an investigation.<sup>27</sup> Later, the organization *Nationale Front* gave Keller the recognition he sought, published his work, and distributed it among its members. Keller became part of a community that was ready to promote his arguments.<sup>28</sup>

Keller had a family history of connection to the Liberal-Democratic Party (the *Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei*), which he could not simply reject. As with other Frontists of the time, he participated in his early years in Liberal-Democratic activities, ultimately coming to the conclusion that the idea of liberalism was outdated. Keller admired the «good old» liberalism, which, in his opinion, had opened the way to the future for Switzerland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just as Frontism was doing a century later.<sup>29</sup> By 1930, Keller had already expressed discontent with the «egoistic» policy of the Liberal-Democratic Party, claiming that he would not join it because «career politicians» would resist reforms of national importance.<sup>30</sup> Later, he would argue that Fascism and Frontism resembled a new worldview, which was destined to carry out the same function as liberalism had done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> Thus, he established a chain of equivalence between

25 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, Ständerat Schöpfer an Dr. Keller 1932, p. 6.

26 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, Ständerat Schöpfer an Dr. Wettstein 1933, p. 16.

27 Keller, Schweizerische Energiewirtschaft.

28 For example, the work about the energy industry mentioned above was published with some changes and additions by the *Nationale Front* in 1933. See: Max Keller, *Die Organisation von Landesunternehmungen und Grossbetrieben. Ein Beitrag zur Neugestaltung der schweizerischen Elektrizitätswirtschaft und zur Reorganisation der Bundesbetriebe, beispielsweise der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen*, Zürich 1933.

29 It is possible that Keller tried to present himself as a liberal using his family's history since liberalism was a political identity much more acceptable to the Swiss public than the Frontist one. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, Keller an Schöpfer, 1935; Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (BAR), E 4320B #1973/87, Strafklage Max Leo Keller wegen Ehrverletzung gegen die Herausgeber der S. Z. am Sonntag Eduard Behrens und Fritz Lieb, 1939, p. 6.

30 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11. M. L. Keller and Dr. R. Schöpfer, September 16, 1930.

31 BAR, E 4320B #1973/87, «Strafklage», p. 6.

«good old» liberalism, Fascism, and Frontism and simultaneously strengthened the meaning of National Socialism, which he defined as a worldview and not merely as a political regime. Liberalism, he argued, was not Swiss-born but imported from abroad.<sup>32</sup> He considered it as well as democracy to be outdated.

Keller used to criticize democracy in the way many far-right activists of his time did: as a field of struggle between egoistic «career politicians» from «selfish» political parties, who just cared about getting elected again.<sup>33</sup> He supported the initiative for a total revision of the federal constitution, seeing it as a continuation of his own views.<sup>34</sup> In his deliberations, he constantly stressed that Swiss democracy was «foreign-born», «fake», and under the influence of Marxists, who «fueled class struggle at the expense of the popular body».<sup>35</sup> To sum up, Keller considered democracy in its current form as a falsely interpreted moment in the public discourse, which in his articulation was attributed a meaning of an anti-national, Marxist political system. In this view, democracy manifested its Marxist allegiance by prosecuting Frontists.<sup>36</sup>

Keller believed that *Klassenkampf* («class struggle»), fueled by socialists, divided society. He also argued that the influence of the signifier *Klassenkampf* was not limited to the social-democratic party because contemporary democracy itself was promoting class struggle. Keller tried to establish a chain of equivalence between Marxism and democracy. It was not even important, for example, that the Liberal-Democratic Party was anti-socialist; in Keller's view, the liberals were all acting within the Marxist discourse since they represented interests of one class that was opposed to others. Marxism here became the nodal point of the Other, which united various hostile forces.

As in German National Socialist rhetoric, Keller related socialist political engagement to a Jewish origin, emphasizing the involvement of «foreign Jews» in the federal strike of 1918.<sup>37</sup> Mentions of Jews remained rare since Marxism was considered the primary enemy.

Swiss democracy, local culture, and federalism were perceived by Keller as «traditions» and, therefore, primordially inalienable from the «national» component of National Socialism. Keller attempted to limit the meaning of Swiss democracy to being an archaic but respected institution, which, however, could not fulfill the demands of the present.

32 Ibid.

33 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, M. L. Keller and Dr. R. Schöpfer, November 15, 1934, E 4320B #1973/87, «Strafklage», p. 4.

34 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, M. L. Keller and Dr. R. Schöpfer, February 2, 1935.

35 Despite the fact that many Frontists shared this opinion, not all of them avoided participation in elections – an act that legitimized the system they despised. Keller here remained consequent, stressing that he had no interest to participate in politics, E 4320B #1973/87, «Strafklage», p. 11.

36 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, M. L. Keller and F. Stämpfli, January 27, 1940.

37 BAR, E 4320B #1973/87, «Strafklage», p. 11.

The word «Swiss» itself, in Keller's use, produced several noteworthy derivatives. *Schweizertum* (swissdom) was used to describe the Swiss nation in connection to its cultural roots.<sup>38</sup> *Schweizervolk* (the Swiss people) was an integrative substantive for the «unified» Swiss people.<sup>39</sup> However, the most interesting derivative was *Systemschweizer* (a philistine Swiss), a contemptuous substantive used to define the conformist democratic population, who «blindly» accepted and protected the «decadent» aspects of the democratic state.<sup>40</sup> While we have no proof that Keller was the one who invented this substantive, he undoubtedly strengthened its negative connotations and specifically connected it to meanings of political conformism, Swiss conservatism, and moral decay. The well-known synonyms *Eidgenossenschaft* (confederation) along with *Eidgenossen* (confederates) and *eidgenössisch* (confederate) are predominantly used in historical references. Keller uses these concepts mainly as pompous language to describe the advantages of comradeship and community. The adherence to National Socialism arose from the context of these signifiers and was considered historically justified since this worldview allegedly embraced the pillars of Swiss identity.<sup>41</sup>

Keller criticized Philipp Etter, the leading figure of the *Geistige Landesverteidigung* and claimed that «national Swiss culture» did not exist and that it could be viewed only as different cultures living together in the federal Swiss state. This was a heavy blow to every patriotic commitment Keller later made. In clear language, he denied the «national» character of the Swiss state, and, at the same time, further contributed to the attempts to define what was pro-«national» and what was not. A «nation» was a political construct, but National Socialists viewed a nation as an incarnation of ethnicity and culture, and so did Keller. The German-speaking Swiss population, in his opinion, belonged to the greater «Germanic» cultural family, and denying that would be the same as denying one's «mother and father».<sup>42</sup> Emotional, deeply personal references were used to make a point to solidify the idea of the Swiss belonging to the family. The cultural kinship of Swiss and Germans should have created the sense of belonging to the greater «Germanic» community, which existed above the Swiss national community. This was a level in the «mythic core» of Keller's ideology we have previously mentioned. The «greater community» was also «national» in a way because it was based on kinship.

Keller mentioned not only the contribution of Germans to Swiss culture but also the contribution of the Swiss to German culture. The point, however, was

38 F.e.: AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 133.

39 AfZ, NL Rolf Henne / 94, Feststellungen über Vefolgungen und Entrechtung Schweizerischer Nationalsozialisten.

40 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 13, Urteil des Bundesstrafgerichts, 1948, p. 118.

41 BAR, E 4320B #1973/87, «Strafklage», p. 8.

42 Ibid., p. 6.

that both of them belonged to the same cultural field at the level of local or regional cultures (Bavarian or Swabian, for example). At the same time, the German cultural space was always considered to be the «elder» by Keller – a fact that is supported by the choice of words: Germany was a «mother country» (*Mutterland*), a term that is not to be confused with «motherland». This means a country from which the phenomenon under consideration took its initial distribution.<sup>43</sup> Switzerland, in this cultural hierarchy, was considered a local region in the greater cultural space. This example reflects, in numerous ways, what Keller did: he attempted to redefine what Switzerland was, meaning both its historic place and the set of identities defining it. This was a more substantial task than to redefine a single element, and he approached this task from various sides.

Keller frequently stated that his main goal was friendly German-Swiss relations, but that is not true. Even in 1939, he stressed that «if we stray away from Germany, it is not the *Reich* that would suffer considerable damage, but we will wither and perish».<sup>44</sup> Later, these views found their way into Keller's political activity.

In 1940, three Frontist activists met with federal president Marcel Pilet-Golaz. In his report about this event (written before the end of the war), Keller claimed that Pilet-Golaz obtained permission from the federal government to conduct this meeting and received them officially.<sup>45</sup> This is important: three members of Swiss Frontism were recognized and accepted at the highest political level.

Keller and others demanded from the federal government an «overhaul of political, social, and cultural relationships in order to align to modern needs». Repeatedly, Keller returned in his report to the signifier «Motherland», underlining his «patriotic» aspiration. Keller presented the «nationalist movement» of Swiss Frontism as a solid body, which it never was, being disseminated among various nationalist groups and organizations. However, he spoke not about organizations, but rather about a worldview and about the people who articulated it, carrying new «political and social views».<sup>46</sup> This was an intelligent choice of rhetoric: while Swiss Frontists lacked unified political representation, conservative and right-wing views had considerable power in Swiss society although it is highly doubtful that Keller rightfully acted as the legitimate representative of the Frontists.

Keller explained the necessity for negotiations as follows: «We, the nationalist movement, are the only ones who can save the country since we are the

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> BAR, J1.17 #1990/98#20\*, J1.107#2012/140#451\*, Aktennotiz über die Audienz der NATIONALEN BEWEGUNG DER SCHWEIZ im Bundeshaus vom Dienstag, den, September 10, 1940.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 1.



only ones who, because of our views, have obtained the right to be heard in Germany and Italy, which together are forming the new power balance in Europe.» He confirmed that the nationalist movement had been seeking a «historical decision» for Switzerland to join the «New Order». This statement contradicts the later testimonies made by Keller during trial, which claimed that the nationalist movement never aimed at an adjustment of the Swiss political system or for an ideological alignment to the *Reich*. The definition of the «New Order» remained a vague empty signifier, and there was a reason for this: no one knew which form it would take exactly, but everyone knew by whom it would be determined.

### **The ideology of Max Leo Keller: after 1941 (emigration to Germany)**

Keller firmly denied that he desired to copy German National Socialism, pointing out that the *Nationale Front* did not directly adopt party symbols or program items from the Nazi Party *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP). Literally, this was true, but the ideological similarity was obvious and could not be ignored. Keller always recognized himself as a «National Socialist» although emphasizing that his National Socialism would not be German but Swiss and Swiss only.<sup>47</sup> Keller himself explained his commitment to National Socialism as follows:

I understood National Socialism to mean nationalism. In other words, to be loyal to the nation you belong to; to pledge yourself to your people, to your land, to your culture, to your essence and origin, and to your history and its best representatives; and to be socialist, to mean being loyal to the community you were born into and to its members and friends.<sup>48</sup>

The people – the concept of *Volk* – was central to this understanding.

After emigration to the Third Reich in 1941, Keller continued to deny Swiss culture and Switzerland's right to be a political nation. Although he did not directly demand Swiss annexation, he advocated the auxiliary state model. An auxiliary state would have had its own version of the national socialist regime, but what that exactly meant was not clarified at all. While residing in Germany, Keller dedicated himself to the political work of NBS.<sup>49</sup> His work in favor of Nazi

<sup>47</sup> The prosecution argued that NBS copied the NSDAP statute, thus debunking Keller's statements. Still, since NBS was managed by several personalities, the question about the level of Keller's personal involvement remains unclear. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, Zu meiner Verteidigung im Militärstrafverfahren, 1945, p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> The obvious need to justify himself caused Keller to use the connotations we observed before his immigration. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 13, «Urteil des Bundesstrafgerichts».



authorities did not contradict his views before his emigration, but rather indicated his logical development from theory into political practices.

Keller's views undoubtedly changed during the emigration, even if during the court process he obviously focused on self-justification. With time, he fully adopted the National Socialist signifiers of blood and origin and frequently acknowledged cultures as primordial and «unchangeable». Despite the fact that Keller argued that he was a «National Socialist» before National Socialism officially emerged, he did not articulate his views before the late 1930s in the form of its latter signification. National Socialism provided the original point of reference for any future definition and twisted the meanings of the moments Keller had previously articulated. Even the adjective «national» was redefined and prepared to take on a more global connotation. «National Socialism» itself remained an empty signifier although it was used as a nodal point. Even if a definition was provided, it was vaguely changed depending on the context; sometimes it was presented as Swiss and sometimes as a universal ideology.<sup>50</sup>

Keller perceived German National Socialism not only as a way to overcome social fragmentation and disunity among the people (as was claimed in the Third Reich), but also as a way to overcome discord among the peoples of Europe. The co-existence of fascist or National Socialist states in Europe was heavily propagated by Nazis in foreign policy; and Keller, as a foreigner and a National Socialist, was particularly vulnerable to this propaganda. The primacy of the nation and the end of class struggle were, in his opinion, a path not only to internal but also to international peaceful coexistence. Progressive «socialism» for him was «natural order», while the «national» component allowed people, in his view, to preserve their original culture and uniqueness.<sup>51</sup> He claimed that he never followed the NSDAP program officially or copied it, but acknowledged its «essentiality» in the prioritization of the people (*Volk*). The nature of individuality was purely deductive: the individual characteristics of a human being were determined by the knowledge of his own «people» and of foreign «peoples» and of differences between them.<sup>52</sup> This statement was another confirmation that despite verbally rejecting the adherence to German National Socialism, Keller adopted its rhetoric at its core.

Keller expressed the deepest respect toward Adolf Hitler, the «carrier of the National Socialist worldview».<sup>53</sup> Occasionally, he equaled Hitler to the German people: «The announced crusade against Hitler was nothing other than an excu-

50 Prosecution documents confirmed that Keller suggested a Swiss version of National Socialism, but it was still considered as based on a rejection of Swiss sovereignty. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 73.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p. 74.

53 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 12, Dr. Max Leo Keller and Dr. Leonardo Gander, 1946, p. 100.

se to crush the German people ...». <sup>54</sup> In his opinion, Hitler was the apex representative, the collective image of the German nation, and Allied claims that the struggle was waged against «Nazis» was considered a lie; «in fact», they were combating the German people. <sup>55</sup> The same thing occurred in the past, Keller argued, when Germans were labeled as *Prussiens* in the times of Bismark and *Boches* (a French expression) in the times of Wilhelm II. <sup>56</sup> The hostility toward Hitler, therefore, was a continuation of the preceding «hatred» against Germans. Keller's attempt to equal Germany (the German Empire), National Socialism, and Hitler was noticeable and consequent.

The global mission of Germany and Adolf Hitler was a new «European order», which would be an incarnation of the National Socialist ideals on a greater scale than it would be within a single country. «It would be right, but not synonymic, to equal the *Reich* and Europe». <sup>57</sup> The signifier *Reich* became a nodal point and determined the meanings of other moments. The Third Reich, as a state, was perceived by Keller as a «bulwark» of European protection against Bolshevism. Thus, through the signifier Europe, Keller referred to a greater historical narrative, to a «messianic mission» that was as important as national interests. This particular view reflected the «mythic core» of his national socialist ideology and formed a nodal point of the *Reich*. The *Reich* became a dream-land, a global superpower, and a mythic essence from past centuries, newly reincarnated in the present. «Europe» was hardly a synonym, as Keller verbally claimed: we notice how it was subordinate both to the actions of the new *Reich* and its idea.

According to Keller, Swiss people were a part of the «Germanic-German *Reich* and German Nation» and each Swiss citizen had an obligation to the *Reich*. <sup>58</sup> Keller attempted to make the issue of the Swiss belonging to the Germans self-evident, because, in his opinion, once it was clarified, it would be easy to convince the Swiss to join the fight. In other words, occasionally, Swiss were also considered a part of the *Reich* when the context was favorable. Keller repeatedly used the concept of «cultural empire» (*kulturelles Reich*) to define the close bonds of Swiss people with Germany. <sup>59</sup> As a nodal point, the *Reich* continued to manifest a flexible meaning in accordance with the context and current propagandistic goals.

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<sup>54</sup> Keller's self-justifications did not contradict to the information contained in the text of the court sentence. Still, even after the war, Keller attempted to alter connotations surrounding the context in order to present Frontists and German National Socialists as victims. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 13, «Kommentar zum Urteil», pp. 46–47.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 52.

<sup>58</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

In Keller's view, the individual is subject to the community he has been born in and is defined by his culture, people, and the national state.<sup>60</sup> An individual is not only under the influence of the community but is bonded to it a priori: «an individual may direct and influence his own existence. He can even deny it. However, he cannot choose it». The signifiers of nation, people, and community are intertwined here, but it is difficult to identify the nodal point they are linked to. Keller attempted to fixate their meanings as belonging to the ethnic origin, *volk*. While *volk* bore primordial connotations, the community was still a subject of political building. The sense of community was not given. Rather, it had to be constructed and strengthened.

Keller was skeptical regarding politics and political action. This view was an obvious ground to reject democracy. He saw politics and political action as only «temporary» in contrast to culture, people, and state (*Kultur, Volk und Staat*).<sup>61</sup> The term *Volk* had frequent use in Keller's rhetoric. Depending on the argument he wanted to back, he used the signifier to refer to «ordinary people», «masses of people», or to nationhood itself (*Volkstum*). Other examples of the composite linguistic use (*Volksseele* and *Volksliebe*) were used metaphorically and romantically. One thing, however, remained certain: *Volk* possessed primordial, given qualities that could not be changed. The primordial connotations of ethnicity replaced the previously glorified concept of nation – not rejecting it directly but simply substituting it in the discourse. The signifier «community» should have been reintroduced since it had been rejected by anti-national powers. At the same time, *Volk* had always been there regardless of circumstances. It was important not only to redefine this element but also to assert its importance. If *Volk* was primordial, it could not simply vanish and could exist even without National Socialism. However, its purity and salvation depended directly on how its importance was determined in the public life. In the list of priorities, *Volk* should come first. The need for community was also a byproduct of this prioritization. Since the Swiss usually perceived themselves as a «nation», the concept of *Volk* was not substantially challenged, and Keller's definition was replicating the existing moment.

Keller's articulation of what National Socialism was came along with the definition of the Other. Above all, he considered communists and socialists as threats to the nation and made only minor reference to the Jewish population.

The enemy on an ideological scale was *Bolschewismus* («Bolshevism»). For Keller, the Bolsheviks' victory meant not only the end of the state but of the very existence as he knew it.<sup>62</sup> A discussion about the threat of Bolshevism began with the start of the Second World War and followed the effort of German pro-

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> In connotations after 1945, it implied the meaning of a continuous military threat from Marxism, but this time against Western states. AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 156.

paganda. The discussion generally complemented or even replaced the condemnation of Marxism, which had been central to the picture of the Other before.

References to *Juden* (Jews) and *jüdisch* (Jewish) were minor in the context of other references to enemies and mainly appeared in late documents, dating predominantly after 1941. A Swiss investigation after the war brought to light the fact that members of the NBS had kept lists of political enemies and Jews.<sup>63</sup> The evidence for this point remains unclear as is the proof for Keller's participation, but it is important to mention it. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether such lists were actually made. In late statements containing a discussion of Jewish participation in socialist events, Keller no longer presented himself as a mediator or pacifier as he had done in the pre-National Socialist times. Again, in this example, Jews and socialism were both closely tied to the nodal point of Marxism.

We found no evidence that Keller was an active advocate of the racial theory. Only documents of the NBS, where he was an influential leader, referred to «Aryan origin». The NBS officially accepted only members of «Aryan origin».<sup>64</sup> According to its statutes, the organization underlined the importance of race and did not accept «Jews, Yellows, and negroes» to its ranks.<sup>65</sup> There were no other references to the Aryan race in the written documents of Max Leo Keller.

In his written defense, Keller continued to compare liberalism to right-wing ideologies, maintaining the chain of equivalence regarding their function. He claimed that liberalism was separate from the «liberalism in power» in the United Kingdom (meaning the difference between ideology and political regime), just as national socialism in Switzerland was different from National Socialism in the Third Reich.<sup>66</sup> Generally, Keller was not as critical of liberalism as one might expect, which was probably the result of his family's past in the Liberal-Democratic Party.<sup>67</sup> Unexpectedly, liberalism did not expand the list of the Other in this case, being subject to moderate criticism only. This attitude did not significantly change over time.

Another point of criticism concerned «spiritual defense» and conservative Swiss patriotism in general. Keller claimed he would recognize spiritual defense only in the form of a «defense of the culture» of the Swiss people against the coming «internationalization».<sup>68</sup> In other words, he attributed some positive connotations to it, but only in spheres where it was useful to combat the Other. Once it was presented as protection from German influence, it was criticized and rejected.

<sup>63</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Schweizerische Bundesanwaltschaft gegen Max Leo Keller», p. 207.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 11, «Verteidigungsschrift», p. 133.



Despite the fact that in some statements Keller called himself a patriot, in another part of his written defense he declared Swiss «patriotism» during World War II to be a phenomenon gripped by «hatred» against and «fear» of Germany.<sup>69</sup> He felt that patriotism itself had become a signifier filled with contrasting meanings. At the same time, he attempted to introduce a new concept of «patriotism» for the Swiss in the form of an acceptance of their place in the Germanic order.

## Conclusion

The data we collected, processed, and interpreted allow us to draw a few conclusions. Max Leo Keller articulated a version of Swiss national socialism that was undoubtedly influenced by the German example. From the rhetoric of the moderate conservatism and patriotic nationalism of his early years – in the period from 1932 to 1939 – Keller gradually turned to radical National Socialism, mixing it with ideas of Swiss identity. From being a self-declared negotiator on behalf of the National Socialist worldview, he turned into a direct violator of Swiss sovereignty after his emigration to Germany.

Keller claimed that his views remained unchanged after National Socialists seized power in Germany. It is true that he was a nationalist even before 1933; however, his political views had never been expressed in the same words as they were during the National Socialist period.

The consequent rhetoric of Max Leo Keller was complex. National Socialism gave him answers to his existential questions. Every moment under consideration in the present study was in some way twisted through the prism of the National Socialist worldview. At the center of the «mythic core» remained the idea of a «national community», which had to be united and remain strong and unchanging through the coming centuries. Swiss national socialism should have been achieved through the «overhaul» of the «decadent» public life and a replacement of the democratic system, which was considered dysfunctional.

We can trace several nodal points present in the articulation of Max Leo Keller. First, «national socialism» itself was a nodal point, which united various elements from political, social, or philosophical dimensions. It could be related almost to any private or public sphere; it was both a basis and a goal for any deserving community. To reject national socialism as a nation would mean to reject any hope of salvation; to welcome it meant to overcome all difficulties. Second, the word «*Reich*» acted as a nodal point in discussions about international relations and was not limited to the state of the «Third Reich». It was a cultural and a romantic «empire», transcending borders of time and space. It

69 AfZ, NL M. L. Keller / 13, «Kommentar zum Urteil», p. 27.



was an empire not only of Germans but of all «Germanic» people to which the Swiss belonged. The signifier «*Reich*» was filled with metaphorical connotations poorly related to actual facts but rather to an imagined utopia. Switzerland was different: it was not and could not have been the same revanchist state as the Third Reich. In these circumstances, Keller proposed that Switzerland would be an auxiliary state – a junior assistant to the German senior comrade. Much of Keller's rhetoric tended to argue that Swiss national interests had to be subordinated to a greater narrative and a European historical mission. Third, the nodal points for the Other were Marxism. It explained the involvement of other political and racial rivals (above all, Jews and liberals) in hostile actions against national socialism. This nodal point was in connection to any existing opposition to the ideology of national socialism.

Despite the fact that Keller expressed a verbal commitment to the idea of Swiss independence and democracy (as a Swiss tradition), we believe these statements were made as justifications during his trial. We cannot deny that Keller's views did presuppose the continuous existence of the Swiss state, but they would deny the state the necessary sovereignty.

Keller's loyalty never belonged to the Swiss government or the nation-state but rather to an abstract ideology: a hybrid of German National Socialism and some selected parts of Swiss identity. In Keller's understanding, only the Swiss far-right movement could act as a voice of the Swiss people because it was the only pro-national actor. The others were anti-national actors. Keller believed that he and his political comrades knew a better way (or, sometimes, the only way) for the future development of the Swiss nation. Since the vast majority of Swiss society had never considered national socialism as a political system for their country, Keller attributed this unwillingness to do so to rival political propaganda, conformist decadence, and a lack of insight, which was depriving the Swiss nation of its political will and denying it the ability to carry out political decisions.

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