

## Nazism and the European idea

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## Nazism and the European idea

Right from the outbreak of the Second World War, the rapid German military victories over the continental European democracies had been fuelling an intense propaganda campaign in support of the idea of a German Europe. The Reich wanted to organise its newly conquered territories along the lines of a united Europe, a *Europäische Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft*, which would put an end to traditional national antagonisms once and for all. So Hitler's Germany did not hesitate to present itself as the champion of European unification and of the New European Order. Official propaganda exalted the values of Western civilisation, which it claimed it was defending against Bolshevism and Anglo-American imperialism. However, the Nazi strategies envisaged the continent being reorganised into a vast European economic and commercial area entirely at the service of the German economy. German geopoliticians particularly hoped to make the fertile plains of Central Europe the breadbasket of the Reich and, at times, considered the forced Germanisation of the subject peoples. The Nazis' plans were dependent upon the existence of a German race, to consist of Alsatians, Austrians, Luxembourgers and the Swiss Germans, as well as the Germans themselves. It would also include the *Volksdeutschen* who, in Europe, could claim to have had German ancestors even if they had since lost all contact with their original culture. This first group would then be joined by parent populations that were judged to be Germanic and easily assimilable, such as the Scandinavians, the Flemish and the Dutch. In contrast to these peoples and to those from the allied and satellite countries (Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Italy), the Slavs from Poland, the Baltic States and the Soviet Union were portrayed as 'subhuman', destined to be eliminated or displaced and enslaved according to the needs of the Reich. The Jews and the Gypsies, who were considered stateless, were condemned to be exterminated. It was in this way that Nazi Germany envisaged the creation of living space for the Reich, under the exclusive control of a reunited and purified Germanic race, as the result of methodical selection carried out by race experts. The German strategies also envisaged linking up a united Europe with the African colonies of the defeated states into a self-governing Eurafrica controlled by the fascist powers of the Axis – Germany and Italy – and their satellites. These discourses on the New Europe, quite apart from the reasons for immediate economic opportunism, helped German officials gain the confidence of certain collaborators in the defeated and occupied European countries. For example, in 1941, a grand exhibition entitled 'European France' was held in Paris, which highlighted the country's agricultural wealth so as to promote its role in the New Europe under German control. That exhibition was followed by other travelling exhibitions, one of which was entitled 'Bolshevism against Europe' and illustrated the crusade being carried out by the Reich and its allies against Communism and for a united Europe. After the war, Communist movements were able to make skilful use of this Nazi concept of Europe and of collaboration to discredit the European ideal, which it considered reactionary.