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The Origins of the German Volk: Cultural Purity and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Germany

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For at least the length of the twentieth century, German nationalism has had the reputation of being particularly chauvinistic, purist, and xenophobic.* Even in its early stages amid the anti-French hysteria of the Napoleonic occupation, we are told, German nationalists exhibited a pronounced tendency to venerate their ethnic and cultural roots and to abominate any perceived intrusions of other peoples or cultures. Trumpeting the natural simplicity and noble purity of their Teutonic forebears' culture and bloodlines, the great publicists of the "national awakening" such as Ernst Moritz Arndt and Turnvater Jahn supposedly enjoyed all too great a success in spreading both the belief in the mythic purity of the German past and the intolerance of anyone or anything foreign that went with it. This xenophobic proclivity has sometimes been attributed to the influence of the romantic movement, with its historicist fascination for nature, the deep past, folkways, and organicism. Others have sought to shield the romantics from such allegations and argued that there were two types of nationalists in the first part of the nineteenth century, one associated with romanticism and nurturing a more cosmopolitan vision of Germany's place in the bosom of Europe, the other chauvinistic and harboring a profound dislike of any close association with the foreign, above all with the suspect Romance peoples.¹

This essay reexamines the role of concerns about ethnic and cultural purity in early nineteenth-century Germany. It calls into question both the usual depictions of nationalist attitudes and the explanations used to support them. It first confronts the problem of German self-representation directly and tests the extent to which educated Germans thought themselves to have been pure in their ethnic and cultural origins. It then goes on to investigate how far they thought German culture might need to be protected from present foreign influences or cleansed of past ones. The essay closes with a brief look at changes in attitudes towards cultural purity later in the nineteenth century and sets them into the context of the controversy over the

Sonderweg thesis of a special, pathological path of German historical development.

It will become clear that German nationalists of the first half of the nineteenth century had a definite appreciation of their mixed ethnic and cultural heritage, and that they were more open to the borrowing of foreign ideas and institutions even in their own day than might have been expected on the basis of the existing literature on German nationalism. This was true alike of the romantic nationalists and of those associated with the more radical and politicized national movement proper. Significantly, each groups' relative openness to the foreign rested on the same basic understanding of organic metaphors and historical change, one emphasizing assimilation rather than autarkic exclusion. If Germans did follow a special path in the development of their national identity, it must have diverged more fully later in the nineteenth century, with changes in German political culture and in the understanding of the culture concept itself.

Notions of Germanic ethnic and cultural purity can certainly claim a long and distinguished lineage. The second-century Roman aristocrat and annalist Tacitus helped give birth to the myth in his *Germania*. Holding a critical mirror up to a decadent Roman world, Tacitus depicted the tall blond Teutonic warriors of the North by contrast as *indigenae*, or as a people that had maintained its ancestral purity of both blood and culture in the lands it had always inhabited. During the Renaissance German humanists proved only too willing to gaze anew into that Tacitean mirror in search of an image of themselves as pure and powerful, an image all the more flattering for being contrasted with the corruption of Rome.²

Scholars have usually claimed that this anti-Roman Tacitean trope of the indigenous and unmixed Germans remained a touchstone of German national identity into and after the nineteenth century, and that along with faith in Germanic purity went fear of foreign contamination that might sully it.³ Tacitean motifs certainly did enjoy continued popularity from the late eighteenth century well into the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries. Examination of several important figures of German romantic and nationalist culture from before the second half of the nineteenth century, however, suggests that such echoes neither masked recognition of the mixed German heritage nor buttressed a call for the exclusion of foreign ethnic and cultural influence.

That romantic nationalists such as Johann Gottfried Herder or Friedrich Schlegel did not ultimately uphold such an autarkic vision of Germanic history and prehistory will not come as a surprise to many readers. Some scholars (most recently Nicole Parfait, Bernhard Giesen, and Liah Greenfeld) still contend that even the romantics let their organicist and anti-French sentiments run away with them, but others such as Wolfgang Altgeld and Jörg Echternkamp prefer to distinguish them from the more radical and purist nationalists of the student fraternity movement. It is certainly true that Herder, Schlegel, and others retained the Tacitean image of the rude but innocent Nordic barbarians who had destroyed

an already enervated Roman Empire, but they also showed awareness of the degree to which the Teutonic tribes were intermixed with other peoples at even a very early stage of their development. Herder for example celebrated the fine physiques and morals of the Germanic tribes and thought it a good thing that someone like the Teutons rather than the Huns or Bulgars had taken over the Roman Empire, while Schlegel for his part presented the migration period as the encounter between a “degenerate Roman population” and the “healthy and also spiritually strong German force of nature.”⁴ Both figures, however, still pointed to the intermixing of other tribes with the Germanic peoples during the Migration Period, as well as to the degree of Slavic penetration of Germany during the early Middle Ages.⁵ Even the idea of the German language as a Fichtean “*Ursprache*” or pure “original language” suffered at Schlegel’s hands, since he stressed the foreign components that had gone into the linguistic mix both in the early period and in the formation of High German during the Middle Ages.⁶

In a broader cultural sense too, for both men the modern German — and indeed western — world was a product of the progressive fusion of Judaeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and Germanic elements from the time of the late Roman Empire to the end of the Middle Ages. Schlegel perhaps put the scheme most succinctly in explaining his preference for the Middle Ages over antiquity as the “*Urbild*” for the best possible human civilization, insofar as it was a “summation of oriental depth, Greco-Roman form, and German morality.”⁷ Germans thus attained almost mythic status as the executors of a divine historical mission to carry out and spread this fusion of all that was best in human history and culture. The key in the present context, of course, was that it was the Germans’ uniquely cosmopolitan ability to understand and assimilate foreign cultural matter that destined them for that civilizing role.⁸ The Teutons had no special claim to ethnic and cultural purity. Moreover, far from being condemned for their absorption of ancient Roman ideas and institutions, by doing so the Germanic peoples had helped create the preconditions for all that was valuable in medieval and modern culture.

This romantic acknowledgment of Germany’s hybrid culture seems clear enough. Less well articulated, however, is the rationale behind romantic attitudes toward German cultural and ethnic purity. The oft-cited residual cosmopolitanism of enlightenment or Catholic provenance undoubtedly played a role, as did the historicist belief that continuity rather than purity was the core criterion of historical change, with cultural traditions handed down from one people to another through a chain of intercultural exchange and interlocked historical causation.

Important too, however, was a particular understanding of natural or organic metaphors, one that emphasized the assimilation of foreign material rather than its exclusion as the keynote of organic processes in human history. Assimilation and digestion, or (in the realm of economic metaphor) appropriation — not the rejection of foreign matter — became the watchwords of thinking about cultural exchange.⁹ With the English example in mind, Herder thought that “graftings” of one culture

onto another could produce healthy results, and he reiterated the assimilatory understanding of organic imagery in other instances as well, as when he asked rhetorically of Greek cultural history whether its hallmark was not “what the Greeks received from other peoples and how excellently they knew how to digest it all in their own healthier blood?”¹⁰

There were of course restrictions on such borrowing. If the foreign intruder completely vanquished the receptor rather than leading to some fusion of the two, there was obviously a problem. Slavish imitation would not satisfy Herder’s criteria for healthy cultural development any more than boorish mistrust of the new and foreign would. Schlegel stipulated the bounds of acceptable borrowing—or acceptable purity—in much the same way. He thought it nonsensical to try to institute an “isolated national development” along the lines of Fichte’s “closed commercial state,” for “if the appropriation is autonomous, if only what is distinctly one’s own in spirit and language, in the myths and mind-set of a people is not lost and forgotten in favor of the foreign culture, then this itself is not blameworthy.”¹¹ As long as the romantic and historicist imperatives for autonomy, originality, and continuity were satisfied, romantic nationalists could call for an assimilation of foreign culture that, if arrogantly masterful, was yet quite cosmopolitan.

In turning to those in the national movement proper, the standard picture asserts even more strongly the prevalence among them of the Tacitean trope of the pure German *Urvolk* and a hypersensitivity to matters of cultural purity, above all in the context of the German-French or Teutonic-Roman oppositions. Even those such as Altgeld and Echternkamp who absolve romantics like Schlegel from such charges tend to highlight the chauvinism of the nationalists, particularly those associated with the student fraternities, or *Burschenschaften*. Many in the national movement did employ such rhetoric, often with specific reference to Tacitus, and more stridently than had Schlegel or Herder. This did not, however, prevent them from demonstrating a full knowledge of their mixed German cultural and ethnic heritage. They even generally approved of such mixing and cultural borrowing, subject to much the same restrictions already seen among the romantic nationalists, and for the same organicist and historicist reasons. In the interests of both the continuity and the autonomy of the fragile German national identity, foreign material had to be appropriated and assimilated, not imitated, imported wholesale, or accepted at the point of the bayonet.

Among the canonical figures of the Napoleonic-era “national awakening,” Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and Ernst Moritz Arndt are most classically associated with the *völkisch* image of the German *Urvolk*, but the trope can be found just as readily in many other propagandists for the cause. The historian of the Germans Heinrich Luden, for example, while accepting that the Teutons were not actually native to Germany, still made much of the “defiant blue eyes” and tall blond physiques that marked the purity of their bloodlines. Among the leaders of the later liberal national movement, the same image can be found in slightly tamer form even in Carl

Welcker's editorial contributions to that Bible of southwest German liberalism, the *Staats-Lexikon*.¹²

As was the case with Herder, however, adherence to some form of the Tacitean trope did not prevent recognition of the degree to which ethnic and cultural contact had occurred before, during, and after the Migration Period. Both Luden and Welcker, for example, accepted that there had been intermixing with Germany's original Celtic populations. Arndt for his part acknowledged the extent of mixing with the Slavic peoples of East Elbian Germany, as for that matter did Johann Gottlieb Fichte in his *Speeches to the German Nation*, despite the centrality of the notion of the German *Ursprache* in those lectures.¹³ Indeed, Slavic settlement of the East and the later fusion of the populations was a major theme of just about any history of early or medieval Germany in this period. Both the eminent Breslau historian Gustav Stenzel and the arch-Catholic Germanist legal historian Georg Phillips can serve as examples. In Stenzel's account, Slavic settlement extended even west of the Elbe, in isolated spots as far as the area around Heidelberg.¹⁴ One could perhaps try to save the idea of widespread belief in German purity by setting the *Urvolk* stage well back into the mythic past, but even this attempt would run up against the fact of increasing scholarly belief in an Indo-European or Indo-Germanic family of languages and nations. This scheme after all suggested not just mixing but even common origins between the Teutons and many other Eurasian peoples in the millennia before first contact with the Greco-Roman world.¹⁵

As had been the case for Herder and Schlegel, for those in the national movement it was continuity and autonomy, not purity, that seemed to be the guiding principles behind the organicist understanding of concepts like the *Urvolk* or *Ursprache*. Luden invoked the assimilatory understanding of organic metaphor quite clearly in asserting that foreign material was only welcome as "nourishment" that would heighten the "life" and "power" of the *Volk*, with "independence" from foreign rule the criterion for such free growth. Fichte's definition of the "original language" emphasized continuity, the necessity of being spoken without interruption from one generation to another, rather than the purity of descent of the language or of those who speak it.¹⁶

Even the extremist Turnvater Jahn operated within the bounds of this understanding of organicist historicism. He did, to be sure, sound off against "mongrel" populations and declare that "the purer a people is, the better." Yet when he came to define the notions of originality, *Ursprache*, and *Urvolk*, he simply argued that this meant the Germans had never been fully conquered, and that the German language owed less to any other languages than they did to it. Arndt offered much the same definition of the "original nature" of the chaste and pure German language, and in showing that the Germans were not a "mixed people" like the French he insisted only on a lesser degree of mixing with Slavic peoples, not complete purity.¹⁷ Similarly, Georg Phillips' account of medieval German expansion into the Slavic East did not try to argue that some kind of *Volk* purity was

reestablished, but he did maintain the existence of a kind of *Volk* continuity. Within the terms of the scholarly debate at the time about whether the Germanic peoples who had lived in those areas prior to Slavic settlement had entirely disappeared before the onset of medieval German colonization, Phillips aligned himself with those such as Arndt who claimed this had not occurred. He argued instead that the colonization represented the revival of a German *Volk* character to these lands that had never entirely vanished under Slavic overlordship. And for Stenzel as for Phillips and Arndt, it was the German capacity to assimilate other peoples—not German purity—that told the tale.¹⁸

Moreover, just as for romantics like Schlegel, adherence to the idea of a German-led modern culture that was a fusion of ancient, medieval, and modern, German, Roman, and Christian, lay deep in the nationalist historical consciousness. The notion of a German world-historical civilizing mission was a central pillar of the nascent German national identity being promoted by the national movement. The image certainly carried with it an anti-Roman stereotype that played particularly well among Protestants, yet the rejection was hardly complete. It has been claimed that “Germanomane” nationalists posited a sort of Teutonic “counter-antiquity” to the neohumanist Greco-Roman version, but this goes too far, not just in the case of ancient Greece but of ancient Rome as well.¹⁹ In a stadial view of world history, of course the modern, German era represented a superior successor phase of that progressive development, with progress above all in the moral and political spheres of humanitarian sentiments, individual liberty, and greater respect for women. Yet there was still much to admire in the example of Rome, and even its harshest critics recognized the extent to which later times were indebted to it. Any residual anti-Roman rhetoric aimed not at total repudiation on grounds of organicist xenophobia, but rather at a masterfully progressive reworking of the foreign material of antiquity on grounds of organic continuity, through borrowing and assimilation. Even Arndt coupled his not unadmiring critique of Roman culture with an acknowledgment of all that the modern Germanic world owed to it in his great anti-Napoleonic propaganda work *The Spirit of the Times*.²⁰

This typical combination of chauvinism and respectful assimilation in the idea of the German mission can be seen most clearly in the *Staats-Lexikon* entry on German history by its principal editor Carl Welcker. Welcker opened his article with a paean to the German *Volk*, to whom providence gave “a nobler origin, greater historical beginnings, a grander calling, and a wider, more lasting influence” than to any other people. But while the physically beautiful, morally pure, freedom-loving Teutons entered the world-historical stage with their 500-year battle versus Rome, Welcker still considered the combination of Roman, Christian, and Germanic elements to be the essential and progressive foundation of “the modern era and world.” Moreover, he explicitly rejected some contemporaries’ “false Teutonic effort” to deny or to expunge the classical portion of the German heritage. Contact with Rome certainly altered, even corrupted older Germanic ways of life, but only

to lay the groundwork for the good that would come after.²¹

The key to all such thinking lay in the sheer self-confidence with which nationalists highlighted German strength, independence, and originality, notwithstanding all the manifest divisions and weaknesses of the German historical experience. The medieval historian Gustav Stenzel connected this sentiment quite bluntly with the German civilizing mission when he observed that the Germans were a people who, “unconcerned about its autonomy, takes up all foreign arts and knowledge appreciatively and uninhibitedly, appropriates them, ennobles them, and with the results of its own spiritual activity seems called to show and to represent the universal education of the human race.” Stenzel deplored German adoption of Roman law in the late Middle Ages, but because too much had been taken on, not because it was foreign as such.²² If there were limits to autonomous assimilation, Germans still had a boldly assimilatory civilizing mission.

The significance of the German mission in the context of assimilatory organic metaphors, German cultural origins, and the Roman legacy comes through perhaps most clearly in the polemical response of the Germanist constitutional historian Georg Waitz to the view of early Germanic politics set forth by fellow Germanist historian Heinrich von Sybel. In 1844, Sybel had published his *Origins of the German Monarchy*. While he insisted on the formative power of the Germanic tribes in developing rather than just receiving Roman political ideas, he did tend to portray the Germanic monarchies as very much a new beginning sparked by contact with Rome.²³ The following year, an irate Waitz countered in a review in a major historical journal. Waitz agreed with Sybel that Germanic states had resulted from the “stimulation of the Germanic nature through Roman civilization,” but he thought Sybel obviously gave a very different meaning to these words. Sybel, he declared, went out of his way to downplay the degree of political development among the Teutonic tribes prior to extensive Roman influence and thus to argue for an almost complete discontinuity between early and later forms of Germanic political life. Disclaiming this view as being akin to comparing Germans to the culturally uninnovative “Blacks,” Waitz insisted on the “life- and generative force of the Germanic being.”²⁴ In an article published in the same journal just before the 1848 Revolution, Waitz went beyond defending the German nation’s historical continuity and gave a ringing confession of faith in its assimilatory mission as a key both to its own group identity and to the ongoing course of European history. Combined with a chauvinist slighting of the progressive assimilatory capacity of Celtic and Slavic peoples and an emphasis on the Germanic assimilation of foreign populations rather than just ideas, Waitz also clearly showed that even this less xenophobic mode of nationalist organicism could still take on aggressive overtones.²⁵

It now remains to be seen whether such recognition of foreign, especially Roman influence on the German past entailed a corresponding openness to these influences in the German present. Much has been made of the debate over the continued use of Roman law in German courts, for instance, but it seems clear that

Germanist nationalists such as Jacob Grimm and Georg Phillips adopted a more moderate, assimilatory stance on the question and did not call for such a complete rupture as has often been contended. This assimilatory moderation holds true even beyond the specific case of Roman law. As I argue in a recent book on German identity, it even extended to embrace German Jews and certain of Central Europe's non-German-speaking groups as welcome constituents of the German nation.²⁶

As for German nationalists' attitudes toward the classical heritage itself in the years after 1800, the prevalent perception that the preference for Greek antiquity in the neohumanist era was so strong and exclusive as to shut out the Roman heritage entirely is surely overstated. The preference for Greece is clear enough, but it did not entail a call to expel Latin language and culture from the German educational system.²⁷ The strongest position in this regard was the insistence that German youths learn German first before moving on to the classical languages, including Latin. Both Arndt and Jahn seem to have acquiesced in such a scheme, while another of the important national awakeners, Heinrich Luden, went still further in his acceptance of the benefits for Germans of studying Greco-Roman antiquity. Even the campaign for a "national education" at the time of the Napoleonic occupation, a movement associated above all with the names of Bernhard Jachmann and Franz Passow, called not just for Greek but also for Latin as elements of such an education.²⁸ Arndt did employ a pathogenic form of organic metaphor in his critique of foreign language learning, but he applied it only to the case of complete replacement of one's native tongue. In general he seemed more concerned with the assimilatory approach to the problem and the formation of character in early childhood. So long as they were sufficiently mature even girls were allowed to learn foreign languages, including French — a shocking admission for Arndt at the height of the anti-French chauvinism surrounding the Wars of Liberation, and regarding the gender most associated with cultural ideals of purity.²⁹

The call for linguistic purity so often seen as central to German nationalism enjoyed its hey-day in precisely that era of anti-French sentiment, but it rather quickly dissipated in the soberer period following 1819 and the repressive Carlsbad Decrees.³⁰ Jahn's calls for linguistic purification actually grew more strident in the 1830s, but he had also begun to serve as the butt of jokes along these lines among the Young Germans, as in Heinrich Laube's novel of 1833, *The Poets*.³¹ Among the important figures of the liberal Germanist movement in the 1840s, both Jacob Grimm and the canonizer of the German literary tradition Georg Gottfried Gervinus insisted on the continued value of immersion in ancient culture as a necessary part of education. Grimm even did so in familiarly organic assimilatory terms, claiming that excising Germany's classical heritage would be like tearing away a piece of one's own skin.³² Nationalism and neohumanism were hardly incompatible in the nineteenth century, nor did the presence of nationalism in the mix entail the dissolution of such liberal humanist values as intercultural exchange.

Later in the nineteenth century and certainly in the first half of the twentieth, there are indications that this more assimilationist conception of German national identity did begin to falter and to be replaced with a more purist kind. Some Germans increasingly began to define themselves to be what the French were not and thought that as the French were the assimilationist land of *Zivilisation*, the Germans must be the nation of a pure organic *Kultur* that had grown in isolation from the foreign.³³ This notion of a fundamental German-French dichotomy rooted in the necessarily “othered” category of national identity has been taken to apply to the whole history of German nationalism in the nineteenth century, yet the discussion here suggests that to the extent it did exist it must have been a development of the late nineteenth century or even after. The question then becomes one of when and why such a transformation of German national identity might have taken place, and how fast and how far it might have grown in various sociocultural milieus. To answer this question fully would obviously require a book of its own (or more), but what follows will at least offer a few preliminary considerations and potential lines of research.

One such consideration would be the fact that Germany’s intellectual climate had already begun to change by the 1850s. The modernizing liberals of the 1840s had still operated in a largely historicist, romantic cultural context, but their counterparts in the years after the 1848 Revolution went about their political business in a world increasingly marked by appeals to materialist science, positivism, and realism. Perhaps counterintuitively, the positivist retreat from German romanticism with its historicist and even organicist roots actually incorporated elements that could work against assimilation as the cultural and national ideal. In particular, the meanings associated with the realm of organic metaphor became much more open to the equation of things foreign with parasites or diseases rather than with food, and thus with things to be shunned from the body cultural rather than sought for. This became all the more likely later in the nineteenth century as the work on the germ theory of disease and on bacilli proved more likely to capture the metaphorical imagination than the contemporaneous research on respiration and digestion. The work of the Roman historian Theodor Mommsen, for example, was already much more marked by this application of organic imagery than by the assimilationist kind, and an imagery of “medical pathology” did find a home in the ideology of the Wilhelmine patriotic societies.³⁴

Social and economic disruption during the concurrent rapid industrialization and agricultural depression of the early Kaiserreich, as one scholar has emphasized, also probably prompted new exclusionary interpretations of the organic and agrarian elements of the romantic *Volk* concept and helped make Felix Dahn’s Goths versus Romans novels perennial bestsellers. Moreover, natural imagery for culture increasingly took on overtones of struggle in the era of Social Darwinism, even as the conception of culture itself underwent a transformation that left it represented as a static, *Volk*-centered natural phenomenon more than as a transitional

assimilatory historical process.³⁵ Coupled with heightened anti-French and anti-Polish sentiment in the post-1871 Kaiserreich, such organic imagery makes a xenophobic reorientation of national identity more explicable.

The more xenophobic and exclusionary interpretation of national identity was an increasingly important factor on the national political scene in the years before the First World War. This was true not just on the radical right of both humble and aristocratic social provenance, but also in the liberal establishment context of the universities, among students and professors alike. At least one prominent scholar has suggested that the patriotic societies of Wilhelmine Germany were very well-connected among the Protestant urban middle-class elites and that their ideological programs expressed the general values of that elite.³⁶ Particularly during the early years of the twentieth century, but above all after 1911 during the era of *Sammlungspolitik*, *völkisch* nationalism grew at once more radical, more widespread, and more politically influential. Voices opposing neohumanist classical education, sometimes heard in the first half of the nineteenth century, grew much more strident and numerous in the 1880s and 1890s and even began to have some institutional effect in restricting the hours devoted to classical study in school. Biological theories of race grew more prevalent from the 1890s, and racist anti-Semitism became a feature of newer versions of German national identity within this same ideological and social milieu.³⁷ Werner Sombart's xenophobic blast at Western corruption during the war in his tract *Merchants and Heroes* was no isolated incident but the culmination of a trend.

Yet even at the current state of research, the story is clearly more complicated than that. Intellectual changes may have begun in the 1850s, but in social and political terms their spread was slower and more uneven. Socially the new attitudes seem to have found their greatest adherents in the growing ranks of the radical right-wing pressure groups and liberal-connected patriotic societies active in the Wilhelmine era of mass politics. This late-developing "German-national public realm" was limited in the sense that Catholics and Socialist workers were generally excluded, and that even among the other social groups not everyone participated in it or actively shared the ideology propagated there. Moreover, even among figures associated with the growth of radical nationalism in the Wilhelmine era, echoes of the assimilatory view lingered. The conservative historian Heinrich von Treitschke preached the virtues of autarky in his *Politics*, but only in the realm of power-politics. Regarding culture he deplored the loss of cosmopolitan values alongside national ones and thought that borrowing (or even stealing) the ideas and inventions of other nations was a necessary part of national life. "Historical greatness," he observed, "depends less on the first discovery or invention than in forming or keeping." The historian Hans Delbrück, almost equally renowned and just as influential among radical nationalists, for his part declared in an essay of 1913 that "Nothing is more unnational than national isolation." If Germany was to find its place in the sun, such men believed, a certain cultural openness would be

required.³⁸ Assimilation and Darwinian struggle were by no means mutually exclusive concepts.

A few recent revisionist studies have followed such more nuanced views of German attitudes towards the foreign into the “German-national public realm,” even regarding issues of racial purity. An important study of the Pan-German League has noted its relatively late if crucial adoption of racist anti-Semitism after 1900, as well as the fact that in its Germanization policy for the Polish lands members tended to call not just for German colonization that would squeeze out the Poles but also for the linguistic and political assimilation of the Poles themselves. A new work on the discourse of “racial hygiene” among Wilhelmine reformers suggests that even someone who worked within the bounds of racial theory such as the feminist leader Gertrud Bäumer could still take an explicitly integrative rather than exclusionary stance, even against anti-Semitism. For all that diffusionist anthropology and the *Lebensraum* concept became closely linked with Nazi ideas of race relations, their creator Friedrich Ratzel still thought of culture in organic yet assimilatory terms. The borrowing of cultural traits played a central role in Ratzel’s scheme, with the measure of a people’s strength lying at least partly in its capacity to maintain a strong cultural identity as it adapts foreign ways. And along with all the cultural mixing went biological blending as well, which led Ratzel to predict that humanity would eventually return to its original racial homogeneity.³⁹

Thus while it is clear that radical exclusionary nationalism grew in strength on the eve of the First World War, the breadth and depth of its support remains uncertain; even some of those associated with the more chauvinist Wilhelmine nationalism retained aspects of the views that were so dominant in the first half of the century. Exploring the transformations of nationalist thought and the uses of organic metaphors alongside the social and cultural history of Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany seems to promise a rich yield in assessing this important strand of the *Sonderweg* thesis. While much recent scholarship has questioned the notion of a distinctly German departure from a western model of social, economic, and political arrangements in the nineteenth century, the same has not been the case for German national identity, where the German form still typically appears as antithetical to the French example, and where the continuities between early German nationalism and National Socialism are still stressed.⁴⁰ This essay should have shown that such a picture cannot hold for the first half of the nineteenth century. Tacitean echoes notwithstanding, German nationalists of that era did not merely concede their mixed ethnic and cultural heritage but positively made a national virtue of it. They did not adopt a purist xenophobic stance but turned instead to an ideal of assimilation. Assimilation could carry ominous and unwelcome overtones for other peoples when it implied the incorporation of minority or foreign populations rather than just foreign ideas, but even that was still quite different from a policy of forced Germanization, much less one of xenophobic exclusion.

Given that it is first and foremost with reference to anti-Semitism that scholars

have claimed to identify a radically xenophobic German nationalism in the years after 1806 (as most recently with Matthew Levinger and Panikos Panayi), it should again be made clear that the findings here also apply to the state of opinion on the position of the German Jews within the German nation. As I argue at greater length elsewhere, even on the so-called Jewish Question German nationalists tended to adopt an assimilatory approach to nationhood. A few isolated anti-Semitic voices calling for radical exclusion stand out, but they did not represent widespread views among politicized nationalists. Anti-Jewish stereotypes were firmly entrenched among them, but most supported emancipation, either as a means of promoting assimilation or for its own sake, with some assimilation expected but not required. In this sense the discussion here remains in line with the views of those such as Jacob Katz or Peter Pulzer, who emphasize the attitudinal sea-change that occurred with the rise of political and racist anti-Semitism—as opposed to previous forms of anti-Judaism—in the years after 1871.⁴¹

The argument presented here may simply suggest that the date of a German divergence from a western model of national identity needs to be pushed back. Xenophobic nationalism might then be just the late and rotten fruit of underlying social, cultural, economic, and political problems that had been fermenting in Bismarck's Empire. Yet determining how and how far the assimilationist ideal began to crumble in the later nineteenth century will have to await the results of future research into the development of that era's "German-national public realm."

* For their assistance with this essay I would like to thank Henry Turner, James Sheehan, Paul Robinson, Lou Roberts, and William Gray, plus the faculty and graduate student participants in the Stanford University Colloquium in European history.

¹ On organicist xenophobia in early nineteenth-century Germany, see Leon Poliakov's *The History of Anti-Semitism*, and more recently, Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 368-69; and Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For a distinct but related perspective on purist romantic conceptions of nature and nations, see Bernhard Giesen, *Intellectuals and the German Nation: Collective Identity in an Axial Age*, trans. Nicholas Levis and Amos Weisz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93-99. Wolfgang Altgeld distinguishes between true cosmopolitan romantics and chauvinist nationalists: "Deutsche Romantik und Geschichte Italiens im Mittelalter," in Reinhard Elze and Pierangelo Schiera eds., *Italia e Germania. Immagini, modelli, miti fra due popoli nell'Ottocento: il Medioevo / Das Mittelalter. Ansichten, Stereotypen und Mythen zweier Völker im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Deutschland und Italien* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 193-220.

² For Tacitus and his reception in German Renaissance humanism: Klaus von See, *Deutsche Germanen-Ideologie von Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1970), 9-13, 15-16; recently Nicole Parfait, *Une certaine idée de l'Allemagne: L'identité*

allemande et ses penseurs de Luther à Heidegger (Paris: Desjonquères, 1999), 55-56.

³ Von See, *Deutsche Germanen-Ideologie*, passim. Also see Jörg Echternkamp, *Der Aufstieg des deutschen Nationalismus (1770-1840)* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 1998), 322, 330-31, where the leading liberal historian and politician Carl von Rotteck as well as the leading nationalist historian Heinrich Luden are noted in this regard; and Parfait, *Une certaine idée*, 32-33, 55-58, where Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Jacob Grimm, and romantics like Friedrich Schlegel are mentioned. Parfait also remarks on the existence of a contrary, more open tradition but finds it much weaker (58, 136-37, n. 44-47).

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in Bernhard Suphan, ed., *Herders Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1909), vol. 14, 271, 288-89; Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte. In achtzehn Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1828*, ed. and intro. by Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 9 Erste Abteilung of Ernst Behler, ed., *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (KFSa), (Munich: Schöningh, 1971), 258-60, quote 258.

⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit," in Jürgen Brummack and Martin Bollacher, eds., *Johann Gottfried Herder. Schriften zu Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Altertum, 1774-1787*, Günter Arnold et al., eds., *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke* (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutsche Klassiker, 1993 [orig. 1774]), vol. 4, 9-107, 43-44 for the Migration Era mixing; Herder, *Ideen*, 385 for Slavic settlement, 456-64 for medieval chivalry as a fusion of Germanic and Arabic elements. Friedrich Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über Universalgeschichte (1805-1806)*, ed. and intro. by Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 14 of KFSa Zweite Abteilung (1960), 113-14, for Slavic settlement; 23-24, esp. fn. 1 on the general historical process of migration and ethnic mixing seen also among the Germans.

⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*, ed. and intro. by Hans Eichner, vol. 6 of KFSa Erste Abteilung (1961), 181.

⁷ Schlegel, *Universalgeschichte*, 168. Also see Herder, *Ideen*, 289, for similar views.

⁸ See classically on this notion of a German cosmopolitan civilizing mission, Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, Robert B. Kimber, trans., Felix Gilbert, intro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 61-62, for Schlegel. Parfait, *Une certaine idée*, passim, notes the same general belief but points up its dangerous potential.

⁹ I argue for this interpretation of organic metaphors on the basis of the conflict over the relationship between Greece and Egypt in Brian Vick, "Greek Origins and Organic Metaphors: Ideals of Cultural Autonomy in Neohumanist Germany from Winckelmann to Curtius," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2002): 483-500. On assimilatory thinking, Axel Horstmann, "Das Fremde und das Eigene—'Assimilation' als hermeneutischer Begriff," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 30 (1986/87): 7-43.

¹⁰ Herder, *Ideen*, 381, for "graftings"; "Älteres Kritisches Wäldchen," in Günter E. Grimm, ed., *Johann Gottfried Herder. Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur, 1767-1781*, vol. 2 of *Werke* [orig. 1767-68], 11-55, 40, for "digest."

¹¹ Schlegel, *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*, 19-20, for "reworked"; 65-66, for the second quote.

¹² Heinrich Luden, *Geschichte des teutschen Volkes*, vol. 1 (Gotha, 1825), 12-13, 450-51; Carl Welcker, "Deutsche Staatsgeschichte, Deutschland, Deutsche, Germanen, deutsche Standesverhältnisse, deutsche Kaiser und deutsche Grundgesetze," in Carl Rotteck and

Welcker, eds., *Das Staats-Lexikon. Encyclopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände*, vol. 4 (Altona, 1837), 281-337, 282.

¹³ Luden, *Geschichte*, 9-10; Welcker, "Mittelalter, das weltgeschichtliche und deutsche, und das Verhältniß derselben zu unseren heutigen geschichtlichen und staatsrechtlichen Zuständen und Aufgaben," in *Staats-Lexikon* vol. 10 (Altona, 1840), 604-37, 622; Ernst Moritz Arndt, *Geist der Zeit I*, Wilhelm Steffens, ed., vol. 6 of August Leffson and Steffens, eds., *Arndts Werke* (Berlin, n.d. [orig. 1806]), 100; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, Fritz Medicus, ed. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), 60-61.

¹⁴ Gustav Stenzel, *Geschichte Deutschlands unter den Fränkischen Kaisern*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1827), 41, 726; Georg Phillips, "Beiträge zur Geschichte Deutschlands vom Jahre 887 bis 936," in *Abhandlungen der Historischen Classe der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3 (1842): 3-124, here 33-34, 48-61.

¹⁵ Jacob Grimm is probably the most famous propagator of this view in addition to Schlegel, Welcker, and Arndt, while even Luden unhappily accepted that the Germans had migrated from Asia and tried to downplay the degree of relationship between them and Persians or Hindus: *Geschichte*, 13-18.

¹⁶ Heinrich Luden, *Ueber das Studium der vaterländischen Geschichte. Vier Vorlesungen aus dem Jahre 1808* (Gotha, 1828), 9-10; Fichte, *Reden*, 61.

¹⁷ Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, *Deutsches Volksthum* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1991 [orig. 1810]), 33-34, for "mongrel," 266, for his definition of originality. On language, Arndt used rich organic imagery to make the point of Germanic originality, but while the implication of purity was greater here, the emphasis was still on continuity: *Geist der Zeit IV*, vol. 9 in Steffens, ed., *Arndts Werke*: 169-70; for ethnic mixing with Slavic peoples, Arndt, *Ansichten und Aussichten der Teutschen Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1814), 179.

¹⁸ Phillips, "Beiträge," 40-50; Arndt, *Versuch in vergleichender Völkergeschichte* (2d ed., Leipzig, 1844), 369-70.

¹⁹ James Q. Whitman, *The Legacy of Roman Law in the German Romantic Era: Historical Vision and Legal Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 205-6. Whitman generally overestimates the anti-Roman sentiment among Germanists, as in the case of the debate over Roman law noted below.

²⁰ Arndt, *Geist der Zeit I*, 85-86.

²¹ Welcker, "Deutsche Staatengeschichte," 281-82, for the paeon and the historical fusion trope, 294, for mixing, including physical, in all parts of Germany, and for opposition to purification.

²² Stenzel, *Geschichte*, 745, for the first quote, 746 and 752, for the next.

²³ Heinrich von Sybel, *Entstehung des deutschen Königthums* (Frankfurt a. M., 1844), 159, for the lack of "organic continuity" between the old and new Germanic political institutions; 160, for the insistence that the borrowing was not a "slavish imitation"; and 154-55, for the notion that they "developed" rather than just "received" the Roman material. In general Sybel argued for a sharp shift from a relatively nomadic, clan-based politics to a more territorial conception of the state on the Roman example.

²⁴ G. Waitz, "Zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 3 (1845): 6-50, here 14-15, for the first quote, and 18 for the second. "Befruchtung," here translated "stimulation," also bears the connotations "insemination" and "fertilization"; Sybel, *Entstehung*, 161.

²⁵ Waitz, "Ueber das germanische Element in der Geschichte des neuern Europa,"

Allgemeine Zeitschrift der Geschichte 9 (1848): 59-71, esp. 68-70.

²⁶ For Grimm, *Verhandlungen der Germanisten zu Frankfurt am Main am 24., 25. und 26. September 1846* (Frankfurt a. M., 1847), 16, 71, 81; Georg Phillips, *Grundsätze des gemeinen Deutschen Privatrechts mit Einschluß des Lehnrechts* (3d ed., Berlin, 1846), vol. 1, 10-15. Brian Vick, *Defining Germany: The 1848 Frankfurt Parliamentarians and National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁷ For the standard view of the role of the Greek heritage in forming German national identity, see Walter Rugg, "Die Antike als Begründung des deutschen Nationalbewußtseins," in Wolfgang Schuller, ed., *Antike in der Moderne* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1985), 267-87; and Manfred Fuhrmann, "Die Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes, der Nationalismus und die Deutsche Klassik," in Fuhrmann, *Brechungen. Wirkungsgeschichtliche Studien zur antik-europäischen Bildungstradition* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 129-49.

²⁸ Jahn, *Deutsches Volksthum*, 136-46, esp. 142-43, 63, 71, for indications of foreign-language learning in high school and after (including quotations in Latin); Luden, *Ueber das Studium*, 37-38, and *Handbuch*, 354, fn. 1. For the "national education" plans, see Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, "Die Nationalschule," in Jachmann and Franz Passow, eds., *Archiv Deutscher Nationalbildung* (Berlin, 1812), 61-98, 86-89; and Passow, "Die Griechische Sprache nach ihrer Bedeutung in der Bildung Deutscher Jugend," in *ibid.*: 99-140, 100-1, 129-31, where the author is careful to say that Latin should be learned after Greek.

²⁹ Arndt, *Geist der Zeit IV*, 139-54, 130-40, for the organic imagery.

³⁰ Echternkamp, *Aufstieg*, 305-6, and 569 n. 34, where Grimm and Arndt are noted.

³¹ Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, *Merke zum Deutschen Volksthum* (Hildburgshausen, 1833), 175-237 for discussion of language purity, here almost completely against the use of foreign words in German. On 177, Jahn comes out against learning multiple foreign languages in youth and this time does not follow it with express permission to do so later on (though he still quotes Greek). For Heinrich Laube's parody of such views, *Die Poeten*, vol. 1 of *Das Junge Europa: Roman in drei Büchern*, in Heinrich Houben, ed., *Heinrich Laube's gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1908), 101. In general on the turn from "Deutschthümelei" in this period, Klaus von See, *Die Ideen von 1789 und die Ideen von 1914: Völkisches Denken in Deutschland zwischen Französischer Revolution und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenaion, 1975), 65-68.

³² Grimm from a speech on education in 1849, as reported in Hedwig Vonessen, *Friedrich Karl von Savigny und Jakob Grimm* (Cologne: Höricke, 1958), 35-36; Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (Leipzig, 1840-44), vol. 5, 57-58, on the beneficial effects of neohumanist classicism in Germany.

³³ Charlotte Tacke, *Denkmal im sozialen Raum: nationale Symbole in Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 29-30, 35-36. Tacke applies this description to the whole nineteenth century, but the evidence seems stronger for the decades before the First World War.

³⁴ Whitman, *Roman Law*, 217, for Mommsen, and on the effects of positivism and materialism. For "medical pathology" and the later patriotic societies, see Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886-1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 82; emphasis on racial purity came later, after the 1890s and the upsurge of interest in Gobineau, 234-45.

³⁵ Von See, *Die Ideen von 1789*, 91-97, where Richard Wagner and Otto von Gierke are discussed along with Dahn. For See, these developments are revivals of early nineteenth-century organicism, as among the Grimms, but again, I see them as in themselves novel, or at most as selective reinterpretations of older writers in a new social and cultural context. On changing conceptions of culture, see Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Michael Schröter and trans. Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 123-29.

³⁶ Chickering, *We Men*, 206, for the reminder about both the spread and limits of the patriotic societies.

³⁷ For the battles over educational reform, see Suzanne Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chapter 4; and Manfred Landfester, *Humanismus und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 149-64. On the development of racial theories as a phenomenon of the second half of the century, see Patrik von zur Mühlen, *Rassenideologien: Geschichte und Hintergründe* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977); and on anti-Semitism, Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). Tal's findings also suggest that change in identity might have been gradual and never total, as liberal opponents of racialist anti-Semitism maintained an assimilationist understanding of Jewish emancipation and German nationhood throughout the period (56, 63-64).

³⁸ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics*, ed. and intro. by Hans Kohn (New York: Harbinger, 1963), 13; Delbrück as quoted in Mark Hewitson, *National Identity and Political Thought in Germany: Wilhelmine Depictions of the French Third Republic, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 256, where this is presented as evidence of a tension between "a threatening degree of diversity" and "a necessary measure of cultural adaptability" in German national identity of the period.

³⁹ On the Pan-German League, Chickering, *We Men*, 230-45, 234, on assimilation, in the 1890s still an option open to Jews as well. On Bäumler and other racialist reformers of the Wilhelmine era, see the fine monograph by Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-Politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 129-41, esp. 131-33. On Ratzel and diffusionism, Woodruff D. Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 146-47.

⁴⁰ Currently influential in emphasizing continuities with National Socialism and contrasts with the French understanding of national identity, see esp. Brubaker, *Citizenship*; Greenfeld, *Nationalism*; and Tacke, *Denkmal*, 29-30, 35-36. More recently, questioning the *Sonderweg* has become typical, but continuities between early nineteenth-century German nationalists and the Nazis are still stressed, as in Panikos Panayi, *Ethnic Minorities in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany: Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Turks and Others* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 1, 20-21; and Matthew Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism: The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture, 1806-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 115-16, where notions of purity are invoked in the context of anti-Semitism.

⁴¹ Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Vick, *Defining Germany*, chapter 3.