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Ingredients of German Nationalism: Land and Language

In the century leading up to the unification of Germany as a political entity, nationalist thinkers grappled with the question of what it meant to be German. Discussion of the German consciousness before the existence of the German state is complicated. They are unified by lineage but have diverse cultures. They have pride in a common language but speak drastically different dialects. Germans felt a duty to their lands yet existed as a diasporic people across many areas touching central Europe. Why is this incredibly unique society drawn towards a common, national identity? To understand this, one may look at the writings of artists and intellectuals at the forefront of this movement, especially works that, retrospectively, had a great impact on the formulation of a German national character. Two sources of German nationalism that stand out are Max Schneckenburger's *The Watch on the Rhine* and Ernst Moritz Arndt's *The German Fatherland*. These poems bluntly illustrate the key ingredients of the nineteenth century German identity: land and language. Schneckenburger's romantic portrayal of the Rhine reflects the German passion for the frontier of their ancestors, or the Fatherland. This blends with the sentiments put forth by Arndt, who defines this Fatherland under linguistic terms. It is worth noting that many states likely unified under a common tongue and shared land. However, the nineteenth century German condition, as shown by the influential writings of poets like Schneckenburger and Arndt, uniquely emphasizes these ingredients as the primary elements of German nationalism.

In these writings, particularly *The Watch on the Rhine*, the landscape carries a national significance. Schneckenburger's romantic vision of the Rhine follows a theme of German

storytelling, where “landscape fuses with fantasy” (MacGregor 122). German romanticism can be seen in the glorified serenity of paintings depicting German lands. The idealized, invented depictions run in parallel to the legends and stories generated during this period. Neil MacGregor juxtaposes the ancient legend of Hermann, who defeated the invading Roman army, with the Grimm brothers’ use of the forest to create a German national aesthetic. The landmarks of the Rhine River and the Teutoburg Forest serve as symbolic literary devices. After Hermann’s victory, “The forest remained in German hands; the Rhine became the frontier of the Roman Empire; the rest of Germany remained unconquered” (114). In the Grimm’s fairy tales, the forest is a menacing yet distinctly German entity. Thus, the landscape is an ever-present element in the German experience, serving as an ancient battleground for German warriors and a contemporary backdrop for German stories, stories that are “re-establishing an identity for German-speaking people who had been dislocated when Napoleon destroyed the Holy Roman Empire...” (124). This assertion introduces a new variable to the German question: their relationship to the French as neighbors and enemies. The Germans use a romantic framing of this relationship to compare the French invasion to that of the Romans, and to give a national ownership to contested areas such as the Rhine.

The Watch on the Rhine unambiguously pleads for the defense of a specific geographical location. In his romantic call to arms, Schneckenburger refers to the river as the “German Rhine”. Like other romantic poets, he projects his passions onto the landscape which, in this case, is a passion for a German national identity:

The dead of an heroic race
From heaven look down and meet this gaze;

He swears with dauntless heart, "O Rhine,
Be German as this breast of mine!"

The Rhine generated passion as an overlapping area between European entities, and “the most problematic overlapping was always with France and focused above all on one historic German city: Strasbourg” (59). MacGregor uses Strasbourg to illustrate why the Rhine and its cities represent the tension between France and Germany. The historically “floating frontiers” of both countries would be the focus of the war in which Schneckenburg’s poetry would become an anthem for German soldiers. Written in 1840, *The Watch on the Rhine* seems to predict the conflict of the Franco-Prussian war, but it is really a reaction to the ongoing conflict, beginning with the invasion of Napoleon. In the second stanza, Schneckenburg describes the defense of the Rhine as “avenging” the country. The ultimate romantic vision, therefore, is to drive the French out of definitively German lands, just as Hermann had supposedly driven out the Romans and secured the Rhine as a German frontier.

The lands romanticized by Schneckenburg and other writers’ patriotic musings are described as “German”. In Ernst Moritz Arndt’s *The German Fatherland*, he defines Germany, or the Fatherland, as a place where people speak German. The use of language in German nationalism is a fascinating topic. Nationalist historians like Arndt saw Germans as superior because “they represented the purest race, they spoke the purest language. This twofold purity guaranteed their creative superiority” (Kohn 791). The language is seen as pure because it is supposedly ancient and unaffected by external influence. One might be led to believe that such a “pure” language has a uniform tradition. However, the dialectic variance across Germany is as diverse as their cultural identities. The evolution of the German language seems to come up at many moments in German history. Martin Luther’s German bible used new type of language,

described as a “carefully crafted compromise language [that] could be more or less understood everywhere” (105). Later writers, such as the aforementioned Grimm brothers, were students of language who saw that “somehow the German language was expressive of the whole German character and psyche, because it had been the language that Germans had always spoken” (Vaughan - MacGregor). The way Germans viewed their own history as a function of language reveals the source for both the concrete and subconscious arguments of nationalist writers.

This belief in language as a powerful and potentially unifying force is asserted by Arndt’s *The German Fatherland*. The inquisitive poem lists places that may be considered German, including various cities and geographic locations such as the Rhine. He asks the reader if these are the boundaries of the Fatherland. Eventually, Arndt answers the question:

Wherever is heard the German tongue,
And German hymns to God are sung!
This is the land, thy Hermann's land;
This, German, is thy fatherland.

With this description, Arndt adds an ingredient to the nationalist German identity. Although the land itself is important, German culture extends to wherever its language is spoken. Hans Kohn argued that Arndt believed the Fatherland “was not a state which existed, not a political community anywhere on the map; it was the dominion of the German tongue which gave to all Germans a common fatherland” (Kohn 794). This interpretation addresses the complexities of nationalist like Arndt, who saw value in separate entities united by a sense of linguistic superiority. A crucial aspect of his work, that find its way into a stanza of this poem, is the constant battle with the French as an intruding, alien force. Arndt’s “nationalism-as all non-Western nationalism-was born in the war against France... in an effort to drive out a foreign ruler and to secure national independence” (789). *The German Fatherland* rejects that notion that

Germany should be a nation dominated by foreign empires, such as the French, who invaded as “pirate-princes”. Just as contempt for the French added passion to the landscape for Schneckeburger, these same feelings elicited an expression of linguistic superiority for Arndt. He refused to accept the perceived deterioration of the German national character by the whims of powerful, but culturally bland outsiders.

There were many ingredients in play leading up to, and during, the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. However, land and language seem to be the concepts that were most engrained in the consciousness of German thinkers. These ideas were linked with lineage, race, and faith in order to create a national character, and ultimately define Germany. The mysterious Schneckeburger, whose work evolved into a battle cry for German soldiers, was a relay of patriotism through a romantic perception of the landscape. Arndt, armed with the brilliant and exaggerated history of a language, became “the first bard of German nationalism” (MacGregor 161) by constructing a national pride through the believed superiority and true breadth of the German language.

Primary

Arndt, Ernst Moritz. *The German Fatherland*. 1813.

Schneckenburger, Max. *The Watch on The Rhine*. 1840.

Secondary

Kohn, Hans. "Arndt and the Character of German Nationalism." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 54, no. 4, July 1949, pp. 787–803., doi:10.2307/1844302.

MacGregor, Neil. *Germany: Memories of a Nation*. Vintage Books, 2017.