

Creating Otherness out of the Air: the German *Volk* and Antisemitism

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Key points

- Prior to unification in 1871, there was no country in Europe known as Germany. While German patriotism existed, in the absence of a state, German nationalism focused on German culture and the German language.
- German nationalism developed a militancy and a sense of vulnerability in response to invasion by Napoleon
- 19th century theories that nationalities (or *Völker*) were living organisms increased this sense of vulnerability and paved the way for the racist belief that the German *Volk* was susceptible to contagion from the presence of non-Germans
- While Jews had survived the violent Middle Ages in German speaking areas to enjoy centuries of relative acceptance in which they contributed a great deal to German culture, they were not emancipated until 1848.
- After German unification under Bismarck, Jews were increasingly seen as dangerous outsiders and made scapegoats for the new German empire's problems.

Overview

During the struggle to liberate themselves from France, some Germans hoped for a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. Others hoped a new German state would be created. After Napoleon's defeat, the Congress of Vienna allowed three large German speaking states, Bavaria, Prussia, and Austria. More than 300 German principalities were reduced to less than 40 and joined in the German Federation presided over by the Austrian Emperor. Many German nationalists saw this as disunity and further subjugation. The struggle for liberation and post-war dissatisfaction over the political division of Europe resulted in both a militant nationalism and a feeling of betrayal familiar to students of the Weimar years. Otto von Bismarck, first Chancellor of a unified Germany established in 1871 "reinforced his appeal to audiences by taking up anti-Semitism."¹ In the 19th century, theories of the German *Volk* developed beliefs in a divinely revealed national history and culture "rooted" in the German landscape. The wide acceptance of these theories secularized German society in a manner not experienced in other European countries. According to historian George L. Mosse, the ideology of the *Volk* replaced religious feeling for many Germans although Christian imagery continued to be used in political art and literature. As emotional and mystical content replaced scholarship, these theories became widely published and accepted even within intellectual circles.²

Early Theories of a *Volk* among Equal *Völker*

In opposition to the enlightened rationalist view that society is the sum of its members, German nationalists such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) theorized that individual members of a community dissolve into an entity called a *Volk*. This mystical, romantic view of society held that any community, whether a church or a nation, was a living organism. Like any part of an organism, the individual could only fully develop if connected to the whole. In the case of the German *Volk*, the life force which maintained the organism was the divinely revealed history of the German nation. Unlike the later theorists, Herder did not believe the German *Volk* was better than other national *Völker*. Herder believed that Germany's destiny was not to dominate but to serve other nations.³

Herder also objected to enlightenment ideas of individual equality, believing such equality conflicted with the organic nature of the *Volk*. In keeping with European Christian tradition, he believed divinely ordained differences between human beings dictated that a nation should be divided into "estates" of nobles, peasants, and tradesmen similar to the classes in Medieval Europe. While each estate's contribution was equal before God and necessary to the whole, peasant and noble were inherently unequal and should remain so.⁴

Napoleon's invasion made this emotional view of the German *Volk* more popular at a time when German nationalism needed to be strengthened in order to liberate German-speaking lands from French domination. As a result, German nationalism became militant and developed a sense of vulnerability to foreign influence and domination which the Nazis would exploit more than a century later.⁵

An Ancient Past Invented for the German *Volk*

Unable to unite due to the political situation in Europe, German nationalists developed theories that each *Volk* shared one soul. This allowed Germans to imagine a “higher reality”⁶ in which the individual was able to achieve unity by connecting to the national soul even when no political state existed. This national “soul” was “rooted”⁷ in the landscape most familiar to it. Connection to this landscape and the national language were believed essential for the individual to flourish. Language and landscape were added to history as an essential component of the *Volk*.⁸

Contrary to the historical record, a belief developed that the German *Volk* was once unified in a glorious. Some came to see the Holy Roman Empire after Charles II as German. This eventually became known as the *First Reich*.⁹ Nostalgia for medieval times when this Reich supposedly existed helped Germans explain their deep emotional attachment to the idea of a German “nation.” Giving the *Volk* ancient roots also implied it could endure the current political resistance to a unified Germany. Similarly, theories that society should once more be divided into estates in which each individual would know his or her place seemed to offer a solution for the displacement and alienation created by the Industrial Revolution.¹⁰

Opposition to Democracy and Disappointment in Unity

Increasingly, beliefs about the *Volk* contrasted the sincerity, honesty, and purity ascribed to the rural landscape with the “corruption” of urban life, seeing in the latter a cause for unrest. According to this theory, the democratic revolution of 1848 was in opposition to the true life force of the *Volk* which desired unity rather than plurality and a rigid class structure rather than individual rights. According to this theory, the aristocracy whose power had been limited in the 1848 Revolution would lead the renewal of the medieval ideal by reversing changes brought by democratization.¹¹

Rapid industrialization posed another threat to the supposedly ideal rural life of the *Volk*. The Industrial Revolution occurred much later and faster in Germany (1870-1900)¹² than in other Western European countries (1700-1900 in Britain). Following German Unification in 1871, large numbers of German peasants, displaced by mechanization, relocated to cities. As cities expanded they spread into the countryside. The destruction of the rural landscape disillusioned many who expected a utopia to follow the long awaited unification of the *Volk*: in 1871 the King of Prussia became emperor of what would become known as the *Second Reich*.¹³

Believing the *Volk* was an organic entity vulnerable to contagion, many Germans began to look for a cause for their society’s “ills.” Although German Jews made up less than one percent of the total population,¹⁴ centuries of restrictions on their employment and ability to own land made Jews incapable of integrating into the rural *völkisch* ideal. Constant expulsions prevented them from becoming “rooted” in the German landscape of villages and market towns. Along with traditional Christian antisemitism, they were increasingly perceived as foreign contaminants to the purity of the *Volk*. Since most Jews lived in cities, they came to represent the “ills” of urban life and were believed to be spreading these to the *Volk*. Jews living in the countryside most often held positions as tradesmen, money lenders or middlemen between peasants and markets. This caused them to appear to be at the center of economic life, regardless of the reality of their tenuous positions in society.¹⁵

Another result of frequent expulsions and forced re-locations was that Jews were seen as having a “restless nature,”¹⁶ totally alien to the ideal rural “rooted” life of the *Volk*. Not only were Jews blamed for spreading foreign elements, but since Judaism was seen as a “national religion,” some German Christians began to believe it had contaminated German Christianity. They believed that St. Paul—a Jew—had overly influenced Christianity to the detriment of the creative energy of the *Volk*.¹⁷

Culturally and physically—through urban expansion—Jews were believed to be destroying the landscape which sustained the *Volk*. In German literature, the stereotypes of “the Jew” began to appear, often as a money-lender who caused a peasant to lose his land. The ideal German landscape, once in the hands of “the Jew” was replaced by a factory.¹⁸

Focus on the regeneration of Germany through an unseen spiritual unity increased focus on Jews as outsiders, spiritually different and therefore working against unity. Even before racist theories of a physical inferiority were used to establish murderous state policies in the Nazi *Third Reich*, Jews were seen as dangerous aliens contaminating the German *Volk*.¹⁹

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- 1 Craig, Gordon A. *Germany 1866-1945* Oxford University: London, 1978, 153
 - 2 Koch, H. W. *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development 1922-1945*. McDonald and Jane's: London, 1975, Mosse, George L. *The Crisis of German Ideology*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964,
 - 3 Koch, 6
 - 4 Koch, 4
 - 5 Mosse, 40
 - 6 Ibid., 15
 - 7 Ibid., 18
 - 8 Mosse, 13-15
 - 9 Koch, 18
 - 10 Ibid., 16-18
 - 11 Ibid., 33
 - 12 Koch, 18
 - 13 Ibid., 19-20
 - 14 Friedländer, Saul, *Nazi Germany and the Jews.*, New York: Harper Collins, 1997, 77-78
 - 15 Ibid., 78
 - 16 Mosse, 22
 - 17 Ibid., 38
 - 18 Mosse, 23-24
 - 19 Ibid., 39-44