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Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany

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Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany

WITHIN THE CONTEXT of National Socialist ideology, folklore emerged as a field of central importance, and it seemed predestined by its very name to aid Hitler in building the new “folk Reich.” The term folklore, however, did not necessarily mean what we think it does today. Throughout the National Socialist movement we can observe an increasing ambiguity concerning such concepts as “folk thought,” “folkdom,” and “folk movement.” The lack of a clear distinction between the traditional cultural heritage of the common folk and the new values of the “folk order” was one of the major reasons why folklore’s status as a science came into serious discredit, particularly after the war. In the late forties, a German sociologist suggested that folklore be abolished altogether as a university discipline, so as to clean the air of the Nazis’ ideological pollution.¹ Fortunately, his suggestions were not followed up, and thus folklore again received an opportunity to assert itself in nonpolitical and international terms.

After 1935, German folklore professors were under pressure by the Party to adapt their theories and findings to the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. This not only implied the obligation to join in the search for Nordic-Germanic symbols at the expense of other interests, but it also meant giving priority to those elements that might be of immediate ideological usefulness to the Party. According to Hermann Bausinger, the German Folklore Association was professional enough to withstand the pressure and to continue its work along customary lines, although enough other groups and individuals were engaged in producing “folkish” absurdities in sufficient quantity to mark a new trend in the history of folklore studies.²

The Nazis’ interest in folklore is well reflected in a number of publications sponsored by the Party between the years 1933 and 1945. Alfred Rosenberg’s National Socialist *Kulturgemeinde* issued a flood of literature on Nordic-Germanic folklore and other related “folkish” issues. Its two major journals, *Kunst und Volk* and *Volkstum und Heimat* were primarily dedicated to traditional folk art, Nordic-Germanic symbols, and folklore derived from the German peasant an-

¹ Hermann Bausinger, “Volksideologie und Volksforschung,” in *Deutsches Geistesleben und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Andreas Flitner (Tübingen, 1965), 140–141.

² *Ibid.*, 140.

cestors. At the same time, both journals reflected the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, either by their peculiar interpretations of the subject, or by the insertion of comments or entire articles related to ideological issues. To what extent these journals reached the public may be gathered from the fact that by the end of 1936 *Kunst und Volk* already counted 15,000 subscribers.³ Shortly before the war, Rosenberg issued still another folklore journal, more or less as a rival to the professional *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* published by the German Folklore Association. In contrast to the increasingly shabby appearance of the professional journal, which had managed to save its integrity, Rosenberg's journal was printed on very expensive paper and could afford to make use of the finest reproductions of pictorial materials.⁴

Rosenberg's *Kulturgemeinde* also sponsored a series of books, the so-called *Kulturbuchreihe*, which were predominantly concerned with folklore and the folk ideology. The *Buchring* (Book Circle) was the committee responsible for promoting this series. Another committee devoted to the task of "cultivating the folk heritage and keeping in readiness the literary materials necessary for the political and ideological training of the German nation"⁵ was the *Reichsstelle für volkstümliches Bücherwesen*, the Committee for Folk Literature, a branch of the *Reichsstelle für Wissenschaft, Bildung und Volkserziehung*, or Committee for Science, Education, and Folk Education. This branch was also responsible for screening the public libraries and the school libraries in accordance with "folk trends," as well as for making sure that after the purge the "right" type of books landed on the shelves.

Many publishing houses in the thirties specialized in the publication of folklore and "folk" literature.⁶ Revealing in this connection is a paperback series issued by the National Socialist Teachers' Association, whose main titles (as advertised in the Teachers' Newspaper of Hamburg in 1937) covered the following topics:

1. Collection Thule (Icelandic Sagas)
2. German Sagas, Legends, and Hero Tales
3. German Folk Books on Customs, Mores, and Regions
4. German Folk Humor and Fables
5. German Folk Tales
6. Early Germanic History.⁷

Obviously this series of "folk books" was a response to the recommendation of the same organization in 1933—that all German schools should give primary attention to the subject of German folklore and ancient Germanic literature.⁸

Underlying the revival of German folklore was the quest for a cultural unity and a permanence of the *Volk*. "A folk culture does not represent progress, but it does represent a gradual development," wrote folklorist Otto Schmidt. "Basically

³ Rudolf Ramlow, "Der deutsche Stil des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts," *Bausteine zum deutschen Nationaltheater*, ed. National Socialist *Kulturgemeinde*, vol. 4 (1935), 99.

⁴ Gerhard Boehle Hirschberg, "Die deutsche Kulturzeitschrift der Gegenwart," cited in Joseph Wulf, *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh, 1963), 231.

⁵ See Walter Hoffmann, *Die deutsche Volksbücherei* (Bayreuth, 1934).

⁶ Walter A. Behrendsohn, *Die humanistische Front: Eine Einführung in die deutsche Emigranten-Literatur* (Zurich, 1946), 27.

⁷ *Hamburger Lehrerzeitung*, October 30, 1937, p. 456.

⁸ "Aufruf des N.S.L.B. zur Pflege germanischen Schrifttums," *Deutsches Bildungswesen*, 10 (1933), 245-467.

it is a steady and permanent force, although it is never rigid or absolutely at rest. As a product of the native soil, it is an expression of the cultural community spirit. Not only does it reflect the folk soul, but it mirrors the *Weltanschauung* of a culture."⁹ Schmidt also talked about "blood and soil," and "folklore as a catalyst of the instinct," but to him more significant than biological concepts were concepts relating to community, language, and the nation's "togetherness." For Germany, a country of "instability, mobility, and diversity," he hoped that folklore would once again become a uniting force, a welding power that might bring permanence to the *Volk*.¹⁰

The search for a folk identity and a cultural unity was a major concern of the folklorists in the thirties. As diverse as the various theories presented might be, they do have in common a certain plan of action that corresponds to a high degree with the goals of Rosenberg's *Kulturgemeinde*. Schmidt chose a significant title for his book, *Volkskunde als politische Aufgabe* (Folklore as a Political Task), and, in accordance with this title, he concerned himself with a variety of cultural and political actions that folklore might stimulate or in which folklore might play a major role. In the studies of Professors Strobel and Boehm, we find a similar concern for the necessity of cultural and political action. "If we want to walk safely into the future," wrote Strobel, "then we will have to walk upon the firm soil of our folklore."¹¹ Boehm demanded of the Germans as a moral obligation that they not only strengthen their national consciousness and their folk spirit, but also be ready to fight for it. The state, he felt, should by all means help the *Volk* in this fight and fateful struggle. Like Schmidt, he perceived in folklore a force of permanence, "a stronger world of being in contrast to the weaker world of historical change,"¹² and in the long run it was, in his opinion, the only effective cultural remedy.

In an essay entitled "A Definite Cultural Policy," Wilhelm Stapel in 1933 considered three reasons why Germany, more than any other European country, had to overcome so many obstacles toward cultural unity.¹³ First, there was the religious contrast between the inherited Germanic religion and the "imported" religion, and the later contrast between the Catholics and the Protestants. Second, he noted the historical contrasts, contained in the vast ideological differences of the early Middle Ages, the idealistic Classic-Romantic age, and the present age. Third, he pointed to the regional contrasts that had developed from the different Germanic tribes and landscapes, including the great variety of dialects and other traditions. Stapel proposed that, in order to overcome the religious, historical, and regional contrasts, one would have to first study them conscientiously. This, of course, implied an emphasis upon folklore and the folk traditions.

A similar attitude was taken by Boehm, although his analysis of Germany's lack of cultural unity emphasized more strongly the "guilt" of all foreign or "alien" elements in Germany's culture. Thus, the reader's attention is drawn involuntarily toward a bias against foreign influences on German history. He more or less "blames," first, the Latin influences, then the Classic influence of the Caro-

⁹ Otto Schmidt, *Volkskundsarbeit als politische Aufgabe* (Berlin, 1937), 94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ Hans Strobel, *Neue Brauchkundsarbeit* (Leipzig, 1937), 16-22.

¹² Max Hildebert Boehm, *Volkskunde* (Berlin, 1937), 8.

¹³ Wilhelm Stapel, "Entschiedene Kulturpolitik," *Deutsches Volkstum* (April, 1933), 313-319.

lingian Renaissance (about 800 A.D.), and, third, the cultural forces of Humanism and Neo-Humanism in Germany that had cultivated the contrasts between the "learned" upper classes, conversing in French, Italian, or Latin, and the common folk communicating in the vernacular. Boehm expressed his confidence in the National Socialist Party's initiative in reestablishing Germany's confidence in her native culture by linking the concept of peasant folklore with that of national unity.¹⁴

Under the influence of National Socialist policy, folklore changed not only its meaning but also its structure as a field of study. The Party did not think it sufficient merely to explore the sources of tradition, unless they could also be used to serve the desired ideology. Consequently, the practical application of folklore to other disciplines received much attention. Boehm, who became the first Professor of Folk Theory at the University of Berlin, strongly advocated an interdisciplinary approach to folklore. He stressed that folklore, as a science, should embrace all the neighboring disciplines, so as to guard against the pitfalls of over-specialization, a "disease" that, in his opinion, had already affected such disciplines as philology, sociology, national psychology, and ethnography. Particularly, he emphasized the danger of an abstract thinking in terms of society at large and of an international point of view. Boehm gave special credit to Friedrich L. Jahn and Wilhelm H. Riehl for having perceived during the previous century the central importance of folklore in the university curriculum. In his introduction to Riehl's lecture on "Die Volkskunde als Wissenschaft" (Folklore as a Science), which originally appeared in 1858, Boehm pointed out Riehl's genuine perception of the folk community and national unity, and of his far-sighted cultural program. However, he pronounced that, while Riehl had merely suggested to merge the social and political spheres, the National Socialists had the mind and the means to carry out this goal. At any rate, more was needed than a popularization of folklore in the old sense. It should emerge as a new field of study and take upon itself the political leadership.¹⁵

A glance at university catalogues during the thirties betrays that Boehm's appeal did not go unheard, or else that the Party cared to promote a folklore policy in the curriculum akin to that which Boehme recommended. Such course titles as "Folk and State," "The Science of Folk and Race," "Family Inheritance and Heritage," "Mores, Customs, and Folkish Prophecy," and "Life Stages of Customs and Beliefs" reveal an interdisciplinary approach to the topic.¹⁶ The Nazis made a special effort to get rid of the formalistic approach until then prevalent and to merge related subjects, such as folklore and sociology, folklore and race theory, and folklore and early history. Of course it was up to them to decide, rather than to academic "experts," which subjects were related and which ones were not. They introduced the new subject of *Volkssoziologie* (folk sociology), which drew heavily upon folklore, and folklore also became a central frame of reference for the disciplines of history, ethnography, demography, geopolitics, and area planning (*Raumplanung*). It seemed indeed as if a dream of "Turn-

¹⁴ Boehm, *Volkskunde*, 1-10.

¹⁵ Max Hildebert Boehm, *W. W. Riehl: Die Volkskunde als Wissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1935), 19-20.

¹⁶ George Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York, 1968), 312-313.

vater" Jahn, who wrote in 1810, had to come true: "We should consider what a university can do for folklore, and that it may be built on folklore."¹⁷ Significantly, the editor of Jahn's *Deutsches Volkstum* (German Folkdom) wrote in a postscript in 1938: "It is only in our time that we begin to realize the true significance of Jahn who really understood the meaning of folklore."¹⁸ As far as the Party's acknowledgment of Riehl is concerned, the numerous re-editions of his works do prove a point. Besides, the *Riehl Preis für deutsche Volkskunde* (Riehl Prize for German Folklore Studies) was awarded annually after 1935 to the author of what the National Socialists considered the best contribution to the field.

The Nordic-Germanic Emphasis

In a research analysis of folklore studies Paul Beyer commented in 1941 that some authors had not only neglected to make a clear distinction between the concepts of Nordic, Germanic, and German, but that they had also willfully used them as interchangeable terms. He maintained that such ambiguity was unacceptable from a professional point of view and that folklore could not and should not be studied from a limited racial point of view.¹⁹ Beyer's criticism is courageous, if we consider the Party's attitude to this topic at the time when he wrote his analysis, and it is enlightening in that it gives evidence of the Nordic-Germanic trend that had invaded the folklore studies of the thirties. On the other hand, his statement did not remain altogether free from National Socialist bias. In speaking about the "Volk as a totality," he was as ambiguous as those writers whom he criticized. In fact, the same expression was employed frequently by Hitler, Goebbels, and Himmler, and at this time it was already commonly understood as the peasant folk of the Nordic-Germanic ancestry.

The new trend culminated in the so-called "Nordic Renaissance" that the art critic Stzygowski hailed as Germany's cultural renewal. He predicted that the return to the "Indo-Germanic North of Europe," in the name of the folkish movement, might save Germany from a final cultural and political decay. The suppression of Nordic folklore and folkdom would inevitably provoke what Oswald Spengler had called "the decline of the West."²⁰

The Nazi ideologists did not think that the emphasis on Nordic culture would be irreconcilable with the traditional German emphasis on Greek culture. On the contrary, there was much talk among them about the "Third Humanism," and many writers were concerned to point out the kinship between the Greek and the Nordic spirit. In some cases, an attempt was made to prove the influence of the Nordic culture upon the Greek culture. Rosenberg, for example, in his book *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (The Mythos of the Twentieth Century), acknowledged the racial relationship between the Greek and the Nordic-Germanic spirit. Generally, however, he left no doubt that he preferred the "strong and heroic" North to the "soft and feminine" South. Whereas the Greeks had loved synthesis,

¹⁷ Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, *Vom deutschen Volkstum* (Jena, 1938), 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, postscript.

¹⁹ Paul Beyer, "Forschungsberichte: Deutsche Volkskunde: I," in *Dichtung und Volkstum*, 41:1 (1941), 99-113.

²⁰ See Josef Stzygowski, *Geistige Umkehr: Indogermanische Gegenwartsstreifzüge eines Kunsthistorikers* (Heidelberg, 1938).

harmony, and contemplation, he thought that the Nordic men in their searching, analytical, and Faustian spirit had loved action.²¹

As a rule, comparative studies of cultures were rare; and, if they did occur here and there, they ended in a hymn of praise for the "native" Nordic-Germanic culture. Whereas in former times folklorists had felt free to write about the Dinaric or Southern origin of certain Nordic myths and symbols, now they were asked to prove the Nordic origin of those elements for which there was evidence to the contrary.

It would be an oversimplification to regard the Nordic-Germanic trend in the Nazis' folklore studies merely as a "racial emphasis." At any rate, "race" within this context was considered more a cultural than a biological criterion, and as such it played a significant role in the Party's cultural politics. According to the polemics of the Third Reich, "race" might be "spirit," and "spirit" might give evidence of "race," and both might be measured in terms of political action. Thus, folklore might present evidence of "race," it might be the "spirit" of race, and it might stimulate the *Volk* to the necessary "folkish action," whatever that implied. Strobel wrote in 1937:

The aim of folklore is and remains to give an unfalsified representation of that which is true to the *Volk*. However, a precondition for such a representation is an understanding of the *Weltanschauung* which is based upon the principle of the blood and on the right faith in distinguishing that which belongs to our race from that which is alien to it.²²

The key word here is "alien." Whatever is alien does not belong physically, and it does not belong spiritually. Strobel thought that it was the folklorist's first responsibility "to weed out" all alien elements that had crept into the Nordic-Germanic myths, customs, and rituals, and to select and propagate that folklore which was as purely as possible related to "the ancestors." A conscientious study of North Germanic history should go hand in hand with a study of the saga literature of Iceland and Norway. Beyond all this, the folklorist should develop a true understanding of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, so as to be able to help build the great future. In order to be well equipped for this task, the new folklorist should study and master not only the subject of folklore but also the subjects of race theory and early history.²³ The racial-cultural interpretation of folklore also received primary attention in Matthes Ziegler's *Volkskunde auf rassischer Grundlage* (Folklore on Racial Foundations, 1934), and in Georg Beitz's *Deutsche Volkskunde* (German Folklore, 1934), both of which were cited frequently in book lists recommended by the Party.

Strobel recommended as an exemplary work along the lines of his suggestions the book by Karl von Spiess, *Deutsche Volkskunde als Erschliesserin deutscher Kultur* (German Folklore as a Key to German Culture). The same book was also praised by the renowned critic Joseph Nadler for its emphasis on race, culture, and early history. Nadler himself considered in an essay the relationship between folklore, ethnology, and racial theory, wherein he came to the conclusion that folklore was a most reliable means to a deeper understanding of the "spiritual life" of the German race. At the same time, folklore, as the basis of a nation's

²¹ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1933), 289.

²² Hans Strobel, cited by Bausinger, 141.

²³ Strobel, *Neue Brauchtumskunde*, 16–22.

self-identification, also presented a hope for political unity and for unified political action.²⁴

Ancient history became an aspect of folklore studies, as much as folklore became a part of every history class. In both fields it was the researcher's task to detect the Nordic-Germanic characteristics, not just of certain peoples and events, but also of folk tales, riddles, customs, and rituals. "The continuity of German life and tradition finally has been proven a fact," wrote a reviewer of Groenbeck's *Kultur und Religion der Germanen* (Culture and Religion of the Germanic Tribes) in 1940.²⁵ By the same token, other reviewers pointed to the high skills of various authors who had "proven" the Nordic-Germanic origin of German drama, German nursery rhymes, and even German sports games. A measure of the craze for the study in "continuity" designs is the 1937 edition of *Urväter Erbe in deutscher Volkskunst* (Our Primal Fathers' Heritage in German Folk Art), which contained about 2,500 symbols dating from the time of the Indo-Germanic tribes through the Northern Stone Period up to the present.²⁶

The confusion of geographical and ethnological concepts that occurred in connection with the Nazis' interpretation of their Nordic "heritage" may be interpreted not only as a racial bias, but also as a desperate attempt to identify with the spirit of the "ancestors." To some extent, this trend may remind us of the Nordic revival movement in Germany under Klopstock, Gerstenberg, Herder, and Grimm, and later under Wagner and the Conservative Revolutionists. Unparalleled, however, was the National Socialist fanaticism in trying to prove a superior civilization of the Germanic North. Also, the scope of the Nazis' public appeal in this connection does not resemble anything that happened along these lines in the past. On the one hand, for example, the Nazis might use for their purposes the results of some archaeological diggings, such as scissors and manicure equipment, in order to build up their "case" that the ancestors could no longer be considered "barbarians, dirty, uncultivated, half-naked, and wild."²⁷ On the other hand, they interpreted the historic and literary documents of the Nordic-Germanic past in such a way as to reveal a certain relevance of the ancient "life style" to that of modern Germany under the leadership of the National Socialist regime. The social and religious order of the Nordic-Germanic tribes, they claimed, was the order of the present and, certainly, the order of the future. In their effort to strengthen the German national self-consciousness, the Nazi ideologists emphasized not only an identification with the heroic age of the past, but also a deep contempt for the Roman civilization. In their view, the glorification of Rome and everything Roman had led to a serious weakening of Germany's folk unity. The "healthy" resources of Germany's own past had been sacrificed to the admiration of Rome. The Minister of the Interior issued a public statement in 1939, underlining the idea that the time had come to get rid of all

²⁴ Joseph Nadler, "Rassenkunde, Volkskunde, Stammeskunde," *Dichtung und Volkstum*, 35:1 (1934).

²⁵ *Gutachtenanzeiger der Bücherkunde*, microfilm, dated January, 1940; Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich.

²⁶ Bausinger, 134.

²⁷ Heinrich Kaul, "Die Kultstätten unserer Vorfahren," in *Neues Volk auf alter Erde*, ed. Karl August Walther (Berlin, 1935), 107.

prejudices against the so-called primitive Germanic culture as well as the notion that there had been anything like an "advanced" Roman culture.²⁸

Peasant Lore and Peasant Policy

Folklore in the Third Reich is unthinkable without the peasant cult that went along with it. When Boehm talked about the "organic rootedness" of the *Volk*, he had in mind first of all the peasantry. The peasant, through his folklore and his folk language, expressed what he considered the spiritual value of the folk community. On various occasions Hitler called the peasant the "cornerstone of the whole nation" who had preserved the primary culture, namely, a loyal racial folklore at its very best. "The question concerning the preservation of our folkdom can only be answered if we have found a solution to the question of how to preserve the peasantry," he said in 1933. "We know from history that our *Volk* can exist without cities, yet it is impossible that it could survive without the peasant."²⁹ On another occasion he announced: "The Third Reich will be a peasant Reich, or it will not be at all."³⁰

Since the Romantic movement, folklore had always paid much attention to the peasant as a natural source of information concerning the traditional heritage. Now, however, research in city life became almost extinct, and the folklore of other classes of society became very rare. If here and there a writer did call attention to the city or other classes, it was only in order to demonstrate their lack of community spirit, their forgetfulness of customs, rituals, and dialects, and their loss of contact with the vital forces of nature. One publication that bore the promising title "Folklore of the Large City" carried the message that a stronger emphasis on peasant folklore was needed in the cities, so as to help transform the recent migration to the city into one away from the city.³¹ Folklorist Schmidt demanded that folklore be consciously employed to counteract the migration of the peasant folk to the cities. In order to get control of the situation, he suggested that the Party emphasize to a greater degree the significance of family bonds, village customs, traditional peasant festivals, folk music, folk dance, processions, and so on. "[Let us] assure a firm, proud, and self-conscious rootedness and autarchy in our customs," he wrote, adding, "The National Socialist Movement is asking for an *organic* development of our culture."³² Boehm also stressed the importance of a new consciousness of folklore within the context of the broader *Volkserziehungsprogramm* (Folk Education Program). In his view, a knowledge of folklore and the peasant community spirit would bring stability and permanence to the larger folk community of the Reich. He expressed his confidence in the Party's initiative concerning the rehabilitation of the peasant guilds. Although aware of the fact that due to differences in inheritance and property possessions not all peasants shared in equal opportunities, equal status, and an equal

²⁸ Cited in Heinrich Lohmann, "Die altnordische Bauernsage in der deutschen Erziehung," in *Volkhafte Schularbeit* (Erfurt, 1938), 21.

²⁹ Adolf Hitler, cited in "Das Dorf wächst ins Reich," *Volk im Werden*, 4 (April, 1933), 11-13.

³⁰ Adolf Hitler, cited in Dr. Karl Sachse, "Das Bauerntum in der deutschen Geschichte," in *Neues Volk auf alter Erde*, ed. Karl August Walther (Berlin, 1935), 115-116.

³¹ Bausinger, 125.

³² Schmidt, 92.

amount of dignity and freedom, he hoped, nevertheless, that the Party would soon remedy the situation.³³

The Nazis' peasant policy, including its concern with the folklore revival, may be considered within the racially oriented "Blood-and-Soil Program" of the Third Reich (*Blut-und-Bodenprogramm*). This program was well advertised by the publications of "Peasant Leader" Walther Darré and bore the conspicuous titles *Das Bauerntum als Lebensquell nordischer Rasse* (The Peasantry as a Life Source of the Nordic Race, 1934) and *Der Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* (The New Nobility of Blood and Soil, 1934). Yet the peasant became more than a symbol of race or a member of a desirable class. Often the peasant portrayals reflected a certain mysticism, and in that sense they reflected some Romantic trends and also the folk movement of the late nineteenth century. In some instances, peasant customs and rituals were treated with a religious reverence, and here and there literature and film festivals conveyed a peasant spirit that was of a peaceful nature. Even Darré's propaganda film on the German peasantry contains scenes that may be considered peaceful and idyllic. A reviewer commented on it in 1939: "We witness here the growing and ripening of corn, the mowing of hay under the German summer sky in the country. We see how the windmills are turning, and how the bread is rising in the hot country oven. Then the bread is brought to the table of the poor who, with pious gesture, cut it crosswise, according to an ancient custom."³⁴

Still, the peaceful element of peasant life took a very moderate place next to the numerous portrayals of the peasant at war. The "fighting spirit" of the peasant folk, and of the *Volk* in general, became an integral part of the Nazis' *Weltanschauung*, especially after 1939. According to Heinrich Himmler, head of the Gestapo, four laws dominated the world. The first of these concerned war and its consequence of natural selection. Second, there was race. Race, he thought, was an element that helped to prove not only German superiority, but also her creativity and her power. Third was the idea of the Reich, which he considered to be rooted firmly in the traditions of the Nordic-Germanic ancestors. Fourth was the Führer, Adolf Hitler. He was a law unto himself, justified by his glory and leadership. Himmler said that an education of the whole nation in the spirit of these laws demanded an emphasis upon racial and Party history, upon the saga literature with its peasant-warrior leaders, and upon general peasant customs and rituals. The handwritten notes to a speech delivered to his generals in Poland in 1944 show that the words "customs and rituals" are heavily underlined, thus indicating their significance within the context of his "folk education" theory.³⁵

The new type of peasant as he emerged under the influence of the Nazi ideology received his visual expression as early as 1937 in the national art exhibit sponsored by the Party in Munich's *Haus der Kunst*. Despite numerous traditional paintings representing in an idyllic manner the peasant and the countryside, shepherds, wood choppers, and so on, the tone of the show was an aggressive rather than a peaceful one. The peasant, although predominant as a subject, appeared to be the

³³ Boehm, *Volkskunde*, 12.

³⁴ "Reichsminister Darré zum deutschen Bauernfilm," in *Film Kurier*, November 11, 1933; see Joseph Wulf, *Theater und Film im Dritten Reich; Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh, 1962), 374.

³⁵ Himmler's Speech to the Generals at the Front in Posen, 1944 (Himmler's Rede vor den Frontgenerälen in Posen). Document MA 316 4842-4857, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich.

chief representative of the new *Weltanschauung*. One critic observed in this connection that along with the worker and the soldier he was the best suitable object to show the "heroic element." As far as the style of painting was concerned, he noted: "[It is] heroic, monumental, fresh and healthy, yet not idyllic . . . the sentimental, soft and dreamy element, the feminine tone, if I may say so, has been pushed into the background in favor of the heroic theme."³⁶

We may observe a similar trend in the new peasant literature that flooded the market after 1933, much of which glorified the peasants as heroes of the Nordic-Germanic past or of the peasant wars in German history. Folklore, in promoting the peasant theme, became similarly obliged to promote the heroic theme. It is no accident that in a Party publication of 1934, citing the "one hundred first books" to be circulated in the National Socialist libraries, folklore publications were listed under the same category as those concerned with racial theory, demography, and "the science of defense."³⁷

With respect to the agricultural situation, the Party had some reason for concern, due especially to a sharp decline in the peasant population. While the population in the villages shrank, it increased heavily in the cities. The number of large cities above 100,000 had risen from five in 1871 to fifty-one in 1933. During the same span of time the rural population had declined to about one-third of the total population, while formerly it had represented about two-thirds. The National Socialists attributed various reasons of the decline of the rural population, including the economic after-effects of World War I.³⁸ As late as 1939 the *Völkischer Beobachter* noted the loss of farm labor to the cities and a continuing decrease of general farm productivity.³⁹ Obviously, the introduction of hereditary farm laws (*Reichserbhofsgesetze*) and the various new land planning measures had not contributed much to a change in this situation.

It remains a peculiar aspect of the Nazi ideology that the peasant and his *Mythos* remained an integral part of the ideology, even at a time when statistics demonstrated that his economic contribution to the Third Reich was insignificant. His ideological importance thus outweighed his practical necessity, and he became more of a symbol than a reality. As a representative of his Nordic-Germanic ancestor of the saga literature, he was a man who knew not only how to plow the soil and how to preserve the cult of the forefathers, but also about war and defense, about love of kinship, hatred of aliens, and territorial conquests.

The preservation of peasant life intrigued Hitler to the point that he assigned to the new Ministry of Food and Agriculture the responsibility for sociopolitical and agricultural questions, as well as that involving the total rehabilitation of the guilds, the labor rights question, questions of law, and long-range plans concerning peasant schools, the hereditary law, settlement in the East, community life, and peasant folklore.

In 1935 the Party had already created about twenty peasant schools. Year after

³⁶ Cited in Joseph Wulf, *Kunst im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh, 1962), 211-213.

³⁷ *Die hundert ersten Bücher für Nationalsozialistische Büchereien* (Munich, 1934).

³⁸ Johann van Leers, *Der Weg des deutschen Bauern: Von der Frühzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1938), 144.

³⁹ David Schönbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (New York, 1966), 159-186.

year, the number of these schools was matched by the growth of agricultural institutes, colleges for farmers, and peasant workshops, of which the last ones were created personally by R. Walther Darré, Peasant Leader of the Third Reich. If we take a closer look at the curricula of the peasant schools, it is obvious that such subjects as folklore and history predominated, whereas practical skills were kept to a minimum. This is especially surprising in view of the fact that the Nazis generally blamed the loss of hired labor to the cities and factories on the peasants' lack of technical know-how and their insufficient general education.⁴⁰ Agricultural Adviser Görlach considered it the primary task of the peasant schools to serve as an antidote to certain evils of modern society. Primarily he had in mind the by-products of a growing urbanization, such as a general decline of the birth rate and the lack of a community spirit among the masses. He thought that, with an emphasis on folklore and history, physical health and discipline, and a practical experience in community living, the schools would be in a superb position to build up German folk consciousness. "These are not schools or institutes of higher learning in the traditional sense," he explained in a book he dedicated to the German peasantry, "but they are home communities with a military touch. Simplicity, order, punctuality, obedience, and comradeship are the basis of this community life. The educational goals are fitness of the body and readiness of the soul, as a 'textbook' serves German history, especially the history of the German peasantry."⁴¹ A similar comment was offered by Döring of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, who in his applause of the curriculum in Darré's Peasant Workshops stressed particularly that the curriculum concentrated "on the essentials only" and, naturally, "on the history of the German peasantry."⁴²

Folklore and Germandom Abroad

The concept of folklore as a weapon became especially pronounced in the Nazis' Eastern policy, concerned with strengthening the German community spirit in the border areas and in the newly won "living space." As Boehm pointed out, the National Socialist concept of the folk community was not limited to the boundaries of the state or to a class or social rank, but it was total in that it also included the German community beyond the boundaries.⁴³ Here especially he found it necessary that the German peasants form a "fighting community" in order to assert themselves against their alien environment. In his book *Folklore as a Political Task*, Otto Schmidt similarly expressed his hope that folklore might play a decisive role with respect to their neighbors. He wrote:

In all those spacious areas in the East, where once German and Germanic peoples used to live and which once again have been conquered by us, new German settlements will grow again! We should recognize them as German settlements at first glance! And when a new farm is joined to an old one, when new houses are attached to an old city, then this will all be done in an unmistakably German style.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid, 160.

⁴¹ Oberlandwirtschaftsrat Dr. Görlach, "Das Erziehungsziel der Bauernschulen," in *Neues Volk auf alter Erde*, ed. Karl August Walther (Berlin, 1935), 158.

⁴² Ministerialrat Dr. Döring, "Die bäuerliche Werkschule," Ibid., 159-165.

⁴³ Boehm, *Volkskunde*, 6-9.

⁴⁴ Schmidt, 92.

Of course, architecture alone was not responsible for determining the “German style.” As Steinacher put it in 1935: “A German society club overseas is not yet a part of our folklore; yet a German peasant village in a foreign language environment is a vital part of our folklore.”⁴⁵ In his view, a peasant village differed from a club in the sense that it was based on customs and traditions that would form the “cement” of the community, thus preparing a fertile soil for the development of the German folk spirit. This folk spirit was basically conceived of as a fighting spirit, a spirit reflecting unity of purpose in the determination to conquer new areas in the East. As such, it is difficult to reconcile with the peasant and settlement spirit of the past, although the Nazis claimed that it was true to the fighting spirit of the North Germanic forefather, who had known not only how to till the soil but also how to handle the sword. Characteristic in this connection is a statement by Foreign Minister Rust on the occasion of his opening speech in a new college in Pomerania: “This institution shall represent the future ideal culture,” he said, “and, as such, its primary goal will be to concentrate all its efforts on the study of folklore, the geography of defense, Germandom in the border areas, and race theory.”⁴⁶ The very selection of these subjects in the name of Germany’s “future ideal culture” betrays the new role of folklore as a weapon in the Nazis’ eastern expansionist policies. Further revealing is a publication, *The History of Houses and Settlements*, which the Party advertised as “a valuable contribution to the fighting spirit of development science.”⁴⁷

As long as folklore studies willingly served to justify the National Socialist “living space” theories and policies in the East, they were hailed and respected. However, they were ignored and rejected if they concerned themselves predominantly with the unique and universal aspects of the so-called alien cultures, either at the expense of the Nordic-Germanic heritage theory or at the expense of their usefulness to the Party.

While folklore studies were thus heavily confined and restricted, their circle of associations and activities was expanded at a rate that would have surprised even Riehl, the spiritual father of the *Volkssoziologie* (folk sociology). In an attempt to establish criteria for the German expansion and settlement in the East, such disciplines as *Raumplanung* (area development) and *Raumwissenschaft* (area science) relied strongly upon folklore studies.⁴⁸

The very concept of “fight for German folkdom” was not a new one, although it achieved a high level of popularity in the thirties. It may be traced back to the *Deutscher Schulverein* (German School League) that was founded in 1880 in Austria in order to support German schools in areas of mixed nationalities. Its later name, *Verein für das Deutschtum in Ausland* (League for Germandom Abroad), dating back to 1908, was again changed, as far as its first word is concerned, when Hans Steinacher became its president in the early thirties; *Volks-*

⁴⁵ Hans Steinacher, “Vom deutschen Volkstum, von der deutschen Volksgenossenschaft und vom volksgebundenen Staat,” in *Das Buch vom deutschen Volkstum*, ed. Paul Gauss (Leipzig, 1935), 415.

⁴⁶ Reichsaussenminister Rust, speech in Lauenburg, 1933; cited in Gerd Rühle, *Das Dritte Reich; Dokumentar; Darstellung des Aufbaues der Nation*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1934), 147.

⁴⁷ Bausinger, 128–129.

⁴⁸ Boehm, *W. H. Riehl*, 19–20.

bund (Folk Association) then replaced *Verein* (League).⁴⁹ Steinacher officially declared folklore the central factor of the folk state. Folklore, he said in 1935, had proved to be the only stable and eternal element in Germany throughout the ages, and, as the Third Reich was planned for eternity, one could ask for no better foundation than folklore.⁵⁰

Also, the earlier attempts of the various associations concerned with promoting Germanism abroad had reflected a view of the peasant population that seemed to correspond to the National Socialist views. Basically, the peasant was considered a stable, healthy, strong, and biologically more valuable group than the city population, and one felt that a broad peasant foundation represented a source of folk strength. This was particularly true for the peasant in the East, who was looked upon as a safeguard for Germany's agricultural production. Reports of the early twenties had indicated that on land estates farther to the east, where the rural population was about only half of that found in other areas of Germany, the community spirit among the peasants had suffered, partially because of an inadequate communication and transportation system and partially because of the young people's drive to join the working teams in the cities.⁵¹ The associations felt doubly motivated at this time to emphasize German folklore in these areas, in order to prevent the peasant from losing his contact with the fatherland.

Yet, despite these surface similarities, there was a pronounced difference between the attitude of the previous associations and the National Socialist *Volksbund*. Especially new was the emphasis upon the "folkish" spirit of struggle and war. The later publications of Steinacher capitalized on the terms *Kampfgemeinschaft* (fighting community) and *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (fate community), both of which were meant as a challenge to the once peaceful peasant settlements in the German border areas and those in the East. Echoing the Party's interpretation of these terms, Steinacher deduced that folklore was proof of a fate that obliged to fight—an obligation inherited from the North Germanic forefathers who assumedly had known (and acted upon) the "true meaning" of race, language, and duty.⁵²

Conclusion

Within the ideological framework of the National Socialist regime, the discipline of folklore was assigned a central position. At the same time, it lost its academic orientation and was applied in situations that had no peaceful purpose. The uses of terminology alone did not always betray the Party's real intentions—a fact that may excuse numerous German folklore professors for not recognizing immediately the far-reaching implications of the new folklore policy. Since the Party claimed to build on the traditional concepts of folk and community as they had been understood by such respected writers as Herder, Möser, Jahn, Görres,

⁴⁹ See Raymond E. Murphy, and others, eds., *National Socialism: Basic Principles, Their Applications by the Nazi Party's Foreign Organization, and the Use of Germans Abroad for Nazi Aims* (Washington, D. C., 1943), 111–130; also, Emil Ehrich, *Die Auslands-Organisationen der N.S.D.A.P.* (Berlin, 1937), 20.

⁵⁰ Steinacher, 415.

⁵¹ See Wilhelm Volz, *Der deutsche Volksboden: Aufsätze zu den Fragen des Ostens* (Breslau, 1926), 363.

⁵² Steinacher, 415.

Riehl, Langbehn, and Lagarde, for example, it was difficult at first to detect the new meaning attached to them by the National Socialist ideology. Moreover, despite the obvious differences involved, it could not be claimed that the traditional concepts had been altogether free from an ethnocentric or a racial bias at all times.

The new folklore studies in the Third Reich appeared under the pretext of carrying out the mission of Germany's cultural revival from its roots. Following the guidelines of Rosenberg's cultural politics, these studies consciously cultivated the peasant heritage of the Nordic-Germanic ancestors, thereby professing a strong preoccupation with the German traditions of the past. The Thousand-Year Reich of the future, as the new folklorists perceived it, had to be built on the stable foundations of customs and traditions still preserved in the modern peasant community. Still, they did not think it sufficient to be concerned merely with a contemplation or analysis of the past. Needed foremost, in their view, was political action. In this respect, the new *Weltanschauung* demanded constant awareness of the Party's future goals, specifically establishing the new German folk community that would have to fight for a national unity and acquiring "living space" in the East. While Riehl, for example, had still admitted a high degree of heterogeneity, the Nazis aimed at a "togetherness" based on a uniformity of values and a conformity to the common goal of conquest and war. The Party's concept of the folk community could no longer be reconciled with Riehl's, which had still tolerated individual differences by giving each member an opportunity to develop his unique potentialities. It was even farther removed from Herder's belief in the ideals of universality and the brotherhood of man.

It remains questionable whether Hitler himself believed in the new folklore policy as the only possible means to achieve his utopian Reich of the future. We know that, as far as his respect for the traditional heritage is concerned, he often was all too eager to sacrifice it for the sake of "progress." Also, it did not seem to touch his "folkish conscience" when it meant tearing down an old church, reinterpreting historical events or certain customs and traditions, even at the expense of truth, if it coincided with his policy. As far as his personal tastes were involved, we may further observe that, despite his professed belief in building a future Reich on the foundations of the German peasantry and its folklore, he admired the bombastic and monumental style of the city. Albert Speer's memoirs have revealed recently that Hitler took great pleasure in personally designing and supervising the models of his gigantic city plans. Speer writes that he would often sacrifice a night's sleep in order to inspect the models and to calculate their possible future effect on the arriving visitors, whereby he showed an almost feverish enthusiasm.⁵³ On the other hand, he favored the structure of relatively small peasant settlements in the East, either in "chain" or "ring" arrangements, that would attach them to certain larger central villages. Significantly, however, the purpose of these plans and blueprints was not to keep alive the genuine community spirit, but to help the Party more effectively carry out the ideological training of its members.

Judging from surface appearances, the National Socialist Party promoted the study of German and Nordic-Germanic folklore on a scale that had never been done before. Yet, aside from the fact that this happened at the expense of international folklore studies, the prevailing attitude of relativism did not permit an

⁵³ See Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 1969), 147-166.

interest in the subject for its own sake. The intrinsic merits of folklore were considered of secondary importance, if of importance at all, in comparison with the practical "usefulness" of folklore within the context of the new regime. Whereas at earlier times the study of folklore had predominantly enhanced a universal perspective, along with the spirit of freedom and a deep respect for the unique aspects of the various cultures of the world, the nationalistic and racial views now severely limited its scope. Even though the Party claimed to have elevated folklore studies to a science, it lacked the objective approach that might have made it into a science. "Scientific" was possibly only the method that the Party employed in systematically expanding the field of folklore studies and in utilizing certain desirable results for its purposes. Throughout the Nazi movement, folklore remained an effective and potentially dangerous tool of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*.

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