

THE GERMAN FOREST

Nature, Identity, and the Contestation
of a National Symbol, 1871–1914

GERMAN AND EUROPEAN STUDIES

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JEFFREY K. WILSON

The German Forest

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Contestation of a National Symbol,
1871–1914

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Jeffrey K. Wilson
Sacramento, March 2011

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Abbreviations

| German Term | Abbreviation | English Translation |
|---|---------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Oberbürgermeister</i> | OB | Lord Mayor |
| <i>Regierungspräsident</i> | RP | District governor |
| <i>Oberpräsident</i> | OP | Governor |
| <i>Regierungsbezirk</i> | RB | Administrative district |
| <i>Stadtverordneten Versammlung</i> | SVV | City Assembly |
| <i>Abgeordnetenhaus</i> | AH | House of Deputies |
| <i>Herrenhaus</i> | HH | House of Lords |
| <i>Zweckverband</i> | ZV | Communal Association |
| <i>Forstmeister</i> | FM | Forester |
| <i>Oberförster</i> | OF | Chief forester |
| <i>Oberforstmeister</i> | OFM | Provincial forester |
| <i>Oberlandforstmesiter</i> | OLFM | Department of Forestry Chief |

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Introduction

The 'German Forest'

Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, the pioneer of German ethnography, insisted in 1852, 'We must preserve the forests, not simply so that the oven is not cold in winter, but also in order that the pulse of German folk life continues to beat warmly and cheerfully, *in order that Germany remains German.*'¹ Over the course of the nineteenth century, an entity known as the 'German forest' arose out of Central Europe's sylvan diversity. Despite great differences among the blankets of firs on the slopes of the Alps, the copses of beech trees on the cliffs above the Baltic, the mixed deciduous woodlands along the banks of the Rhine, and the piny monocultures of eastern Prussia, many authors subsumed all of these biomes under the label of the 'German forest.' But what purpose did this rather artificial concept have? What was it supposed to mean? Why did so many authors find it necessary to invent this category? For Riehl and all those writing on 'German forest,' the woods contained the German national essence. This book investigates the connections between nature and nation in late-nineteenth-century Germany, shedding light on the contested national meanings invested in the forest, and in turn, exploring the influence of this sylvan discourse on social relations, political conflicts, and German national identity during the period of the German Empire, or *Kaiserreich*, from 1871 to 1914.

Interest in the 'German forest' as a source of national identity dates back as far as the Reformation, when Protestant German scholars encountered Tacitus's *Germania*. For them, Tacitus's description of the Teutonic noble savages waging war against a decadent and declining Rome mirrored their own situation. Emerging from the woods, identi-

fied as the source of their strength and freedom, they beat back a corrupt empire that sought to subjugate them. In the late eighteenth century – deriving inspiration from the patriotic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder – the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock drew symbols from this ancient past to articulate what he regarded as the essence of the German national character, in reaction to the universalizing tendencies of the French Enlightenment. He chose the oak as the emblem of Germanic resolve and independence, and inspired the creation of the Göttingen Grove League (1772) by poets in an early revolt against French neo-classicism. This mood of defiance only grew with Napoleon's occupation of the German states at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The memory of the ancient Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, in which the Germanic hero Arminius (Hermann) ambushed and defeated three Roman legions in the woods, resonated with German nationalists. Heinrich von Kleist, moved by the patriotic spirit of the times, called for a national uprising against French occupation in his thinly veiled play *Hermann's Battle*, recalling Arminius's victory. The celebrated painter Caspar David Friedrich likewise mobilized the forest against the French invaders, depicting a French *chasseur* lost in the woods. Inspired by romanticism, the nationalist Ernst Moritz Arndt called in 1815 for the resurrection of 'the old Germanic groves' because 'the German person must nowhere lack trees,' and believed such forests could serve as a defensive barrier against the Germans' enemies, particularly the French.² Riehl, as Arndt's student, inherited his passion for the forest and sought to protect it, along with German society, from the depredations of capitalism, perceived as a foreign invader ravaging the German countryside.

While the discourse about the 'German forest' had its roots in the romantic nationalism of the early nineteenth century, the concept blossomed around 1900. Riehl's work found little reception during the confident economic boom years of the 1850s and 1860s; the rapid pace of industrialization, and the dramatic transformation of the German lands into a nation state, led to widespread confidence among educated elites. However, the economic crash of 1873 and the emergence of a mass socialist movement created some doubt about the current order for bourgeois Germans. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some on the right and the left began to fear social revolution, eroding tradition, intellectual disorientation, and national degeneration. Authors sought solutions to Germany's pressing problems – whether real or imagined – everywhere. Some turned to the forest for their answers.

The period between 1880 and 1914 witnessed a proliferation of popu-

lar works – written by foresters and botanists, geographers and historians, lawyers and politicians, poets and painters, nature preservationists and urban reformers – invoking the ‘German forest’ in their text and in their titles. These works generally agreed on a common set of ideas, comprising the sylvan discourse. First, Germans shared a common reverence for the woods, rooted in their barbarian past. Second, this special relationship with the forest had been preserved in Germany until at least the late eighteenth century, despite the encroachment of feudal rights on once commonly held woodlands. Third, forests came under pressure with the arrival of capitalism, as many unscrupulous landowners (including perhaps the state) transformed their stands of timber into profits. Fourth, the loss of woodlands carried costs for the nation, whether environmental (greater erosion and flooding), medical (less clean air and declining opportunities for healthy recreation, especially for the urban populace), social (fewer sources of income and resources for peasants), economic (dwindling sources of wood at a time of rampant worldwide consumption), cultural (less opportunity for artistic inspiration and scientific investigation), or political (waning attachment to the region [*Heimat*] and the nation). Fifth, Southern European cultures had already decimated their forest in ancient times and declined as a result; it might only be a matter of time before Western Europeans – and further in the future, the Americans and the Russians – would suffer a similar fate. Sixth, Germany’s continued success relied on defending the forest against the threat posed by unbridled capitalism. The notion of the ‘German forest,’ and its importance for the nation, achieved near universal assent; it was open enough to encompass a broad range of political and economic attitudes, yet specific enough to be meaningful.

Yet precisely because the ‘German forest’ was such a widely disseminated symbol of Germandom, a broad range of groups attempted to mobilize it for their own ends. Although inspired by the traditionalist Riehl, these actors sought some kind of accommodation with modernity, using the forest in a variety of ways to adapt to an industrializing and urbanizing society. Landowners, hunters, timber producers, peasant-rights activists, hikers, charitable organizations, and state officials all deployed the term ‘German forest’ for widely divergent purposes, illustrating the ways nationalist and proto-environmentalist language could be used for material aims. Thus, perhaps more interesting than the fact that Germans invested their landscape with national meaning are the ways in which this symbol – intended to unite the nation – became an object of bitter contention in the *Kaiserreich*.

While Germans thought of their relationship with nature as unique, this was by no means the case. This book should not be understood as an argument that Germany somehow diverged significantly from the rest of the Western world in this regard. Other peoples invested their landscapes with national meaning and saw themselves as products of the native soil. German authors frequently praised their nation for its deep roots in the countryside, but this was hardly unique in Europe. Starting in the eighteenth century, the British in particular invested enormous meaning in their pastoral landscapes, quite at odds with the country's burgeoning industrial development. And while forests, of which there were relatively few left by the nineteenth century, did not stand at the centre of British landscape ideology, for Sweden they did. The Swedes, perhaps influenced by German developments, articulated a forest discourse strikingly similar to Germany's. Even the French, renowned as an urban and urbane nation with rigidly geometric gardens (and denigrated by the Germans for their divorce from nature), engaged in large-scale reforestation and sought out their roots in the native soil. Likewise, the frontiers of the two incipient superpowers, the United States and Russia, played a critical role in the development and identities of those nations.³

Historiography

The scholarly literatures on the nation and landscape have identified both as human constructions. Benedict Anderson famously illustrated the ways in which print capitalism allowed readers of a vernacular to imagine themselves as part of a national community.⁴ While the character of this process of imagination has been disputed – the debate centring on when these identities arose and how subservient they were to the state⁵ – a variety of actors mobilized the concept of the nation during the modern era, defining and redefining the contours of the national community. For example, nationalists have created myths about their homelands, disseminating national memories to legitimate the national movement and its demands (often for territory).⁶ Anthony Smith argues landscapes play an important part in the imagination of the nation. He notes that communities have often encoded their landscapes with ethnic 'meaning,' uniting the fate of a homeland with its residents.⁷ These constructed national pasts and landscapes, frequently intertwined, comprise a central element of national identities.

At the same time, historians of landscape have shown how the country-

side is constructed not just physically, but also ideologically. As the Swedish ethnographer Orvar Löfgren notes, 'All nature is a cultural landscape; even when it has not been physically shaped by the exertions of cultivators or land developers, it is filtered through our consciousness.'⁸ Powerful interests shape the land, not just for their economic benefit or personal pleasure, but also to inscribe ideologies on the environment. Chandra Mukerji's book on the gardens of Versailles demonstrates wonderfully the ways in which Louis XIV's landscape architects, influenced by new ideologies about the state, produced palace gardens that expressed the might of French absolutism. Employing techniques borrowed from the construction of fortifications, they sought to impose on the land emblems of the monarch's control of nature.⁹ At about the same time, English aristocrats sought to articulate ideas about their own power – vis-à-vis the king and the rising middle class – by substantially altering the grounds of their estates. They chose to create an illusion of a free and bucolic countryside, from whence they had arisen, screening out evidence of peasant labour and oppression.¹⁰ Thus various actors invested the land with political meaning. When the ideologies of nation and landscape – two forms of legitimizing claims to power – combined in the nineteenth century, they produced a powerful new form of nationalism prepared for the age of mass politics. And as these examples suggest, the process of imagining landscapes freighted with symbolism was hardly unique to Germany.

German scholars of the nineteenth century grew increasingly aware of the importance of this ideological combination (although they were by no means alone in this recognition). While liberal nationalists felt a strong connection to the German nation state erected in 1871, millions of other German citizens – particularists loyal to regional identities, conservatives repelled by the liberal aspects of the new regime, Catholics alienated by Protestant dominance in a Prusso-centric Germany, and the multitudes without much formal education and indifferent to national politics, not to mention nationally minded members of ethnic minorities concerned with their inclusion in the German nation state – felt no special attachment, if not outright hostility, to this recent political invention.¹¹ Moreover, Otto von Bismarck, a conservative stalwart and the new imperial chancellor, was only a reluctant convert to the national idea and remained fiercely loyal to his native Prussia; he saw no particular need to cultivate a national identity once he had extended Prussian power. Without much support from above or below, liberal nationalists felt the

urgency of constructing a national identity that would sustain the new nation state. Landscape, providing the nation with territorial and historical rootedness, would help enormously in this process.

The landscape could serve as a venue, along with museums, monuments, parades, and festivals, to experience the nation. Indeed, as the British cultural geographer Stephen Daniels maintains, 'To imagine a nation is to envision its geography,' thus creating a 'portrait of the nation.'¹² Bourgeois German travellers, stimulated by an interest in their local *Heimat*, took to the land to gain a more intimate knowledge of their nation. Whether as avid hikers, casual tourists, leisurely strollers (*Spaziergänger*), or armchair consumers of postcards and picture books, over the course of the nineteenth century the middle classes ventured into the countryside to discover the national essence they believed resided there. In small towns and quiet woods, they discovered what to them appeared to be a timeless terrain, and they invested it with elements of national memory.¹³ Every locality could claim some connection to the pantheon of German history, linking the local scenery and memories with the national story.

Endowing the countryside with national memories constituted more than a dreamy romanticism or a flight from modernity. By consuming images of this newly imagined national geography, and by venturing out into it, the middle classes claimed the landscape for themselves, mapping out a new image of the nation.¹⁴ Guidebooks and maps gave them new access to the land, and rather than remaining confined by the tangle of feudal boundaries dividing Germany, hikers and tourists crossed them both physically and mentally, imagining a nation united.¹⁵ Increasingly, bourgeois nature enthusiasts articulated claims to both public and private land, demanding access to the national patrimony of healthy forests and beautiful scenery. This entailed mobilizing public protest and even trespassing. As historian Celia Applegate puts it, 'Tourism and romanticism combined to make the out-of-doors into a public space, equally infused with local patriotism and national pride.'¹⁶ The German countryside, as a new site of leisure, helped create a new middle-class public and at the same time became increasingly political.

Until recently, those assessing this German relationship with nature, and with the forest in particular, have cast it in a harshly negative light. George Mosse, in his exploration of the ideas and culture of German nationalism, firmly linked discourses around landscape to radical ethnic, or *völkisch*, nationalism. *Völkisch* thinkers, he demonstrated, imagined the German landscape as a site of rootedness, joining the soil and its

tillers in a mystical, timeless unity. As such, the land supposedly inspired an emotional and irrational sense of national identity – in contrast to Western Europe’s moderate civic nationalism – thus creating an intellectual *Sonderweg* (or special path) leading to the rise of National Socialism.¹⁷ Fritz Stern also contrasted the rationality of the West with Germany’s fatal irrationalism, as expressed in ‘racial thought, Germanic Christianity, and Volkish nature mysticism.’¹⁸ While Mosse and Stern described an important aspect of radical nationalist thought, which provided a clear foreshadowing of the Nazis’ blood and soil ideology, they nevertheless presented only one part of the story. Radical nationalists by no means dominated interest in nature.

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars appropriated this model of an intellectual ‘special path,’ condemning the Germans’ passion for the landscape as anti-modern, anti-democratic, manipulative, feudal, unenvironmentally conscious, and claiming the popular affinity for nature necessarily helped to produce fascism. ‘Forest history is,’ the foreword to a collection of essays on the topic states, ‘a history of German self-understanding, a *Sonderweg* on which a late nation seeks an identity.’¹⁹ According to this interpretation, a passion for the woods was part of the German bourgeoisie’s rejection of modernity, the fatal flaw that doomed Europe. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this argument goes, the woods became ‘the reactionary counter-symbol to modern industrial class society.’²⁰ Radical nationalists opposed to Germany’s modernization took up Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl’s critiques of capitalism and demands for forest preservation.²¹ Interest in nature was promoted by an insecure bourgeoisie that had ‘abandoned itself to romantic longings – irrational daydreams without any real foundation, arising from latent anxiety and fed by an apparent crisis into which Wilhelmine Germany had fallen.’²² Serious efforts at preserving nature came too late in Germany, and nature enthusiasts’ goals were made ‘questionable’ by their national motives. One historian even insists that wood tariffs, selfishly imposed by Germans who apparently could not recognize the value of free trade, contributed to the First World War.²³ As a result of all this irrationality, another account concludes, ‘for a good two-hundred years, German nationalism and the romanticization of nature have been disastrously interwoven, and above all the French suffered (in 1870/71, 1914, and 1940) from the aggressive sense of mission that we Germans acquired in the forest, so to speak.’²⁴ Apparently, the ‘German forest’ has much to answer for. Although the theory of Germany’s alleged *Sonderweg* came under intense criticism in the 1980s and 1990s – to the point of

being largely abandoned by social historians today – among historians of culture and ideas, the concept retains some currency.²⁵

Some scholars have begun to draw distinctions. Condemning the ‘bourgeois’ understanding of nature, Ulrich Linse – along with Gert Gröning, Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, and William T. Markham – seek to salvage the German Social Democrats’ rational and unpatriotic embrace of the woods.²⁶ Yet these authors homogenize the views of radical nationalists with those of all middle-class Germans, leaving Mosse’s *Sonderweg* largely intact. Simon Schama distinguishes between a rational and an irrational approach to the forest, contrasting the advanced techniques of German forestry with the primitivism of Germany’s radical nationalists.²⁷ But Schama’s account likewise makes little room for anyone other than oft-despised foresters on one hand, and right-wing cranks on the other.

Implicit in all of these arguments is the assumption of a German *Sonderweg* to modernity that culminated in the disaster of Nazism. They posit a deviant, distinctly un-Western relationship with nature. At the centre of this landscape perversion is the Germans’ infusion of their countryside with national meaning. But as the 1990s boom in landscape studies on Britain and North America has shown, investing the landscape with national significance was a Western norm, not an aberration.²⁸ One of the reasons for this persistent misunderstanding of the Germans’ relationship with their environment has been the scholarship’s emphasis on the history of ideas. By concentrating on the views of certain personalities (and in turn implying their widespread acceptance), many historians have ignored local experience and social practice. As the British cultural geographer W.T.J. Mitchell insists, we should consider landscape an ‘instrument of cultural power’ and concern ourselves with ‘not just what landscape “is” or “means” but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice.’²⁹ Raymond Williams made much the same point in *The Country and the City*: ‘It is possible and useful to trace the internal histories of landscape painting, and landscape writing, landscape gardening and landscape architecture, but in any final analysis we must relate these histories to the common history of a land and its society.’³⁰ By turning our attention away from the pronouncements of a few highly placed individuals, and towards the sentiments and activities of those at the local level, a different image of the land comes into focus.

Fortunately, a few historians have begun to take up this challenge. In the 1990s, scholars of the *Heimat* movement – which sought to preserve the landscapes, architecture, and folkways of Germany’s many regions

– have significantly revised our image of those interested in landscape preservation, transforming our understanding of the groups involved from bastions of reaction into relatively liberal organizations.³¹ John Williams insists that older scholarship has relied too heavily on the history of ideas approach – drawing from a narrow range of sources associated with particular prominent individuals – and has eschewed cross-cultural comparisons. This tendency has produced, according to Williams, a misleading impression of Germans as irrationally preoccupied with nature, and of the German environmental movement as led by equally irrational *völkisch* thinkers. He therefore explores attitudes towards nature among a variety of locally based organizations.³² Investigating environmental attitudes in imperial Germany's *Heimat* movement, William Rollins reasons that while nature enthusiasts seemed irrationally engaged in an aesthetic critique of industrialism and capitalism – at the expense of a critical engagement with the more corrosive effects of pollution, for example – they inspired an 'aesthetic environmentalism' that invested Germans' emotions in their landscape, thus laying the foundation for the public's currently strong concern with environmental issues.³³ Thomas Lekan draws significant distinctions between the German conservationists in the Rhineland, who pursued their own agenda from the late nineteenth century on, and the Nazi state, with which these groups came into conflict after an initial honeymoon.³⁴ The straight road from conservationism to Nazism has been made significantly more crooked.

The recent trend in literature on the *Kaiserreich* in general has been to highlight the ambivalence of modernity. Rather than believing a deficit of modernity lead to fascism, scholars have concentrated their attention on the ways that the embrace of modernity contributed to the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Detlev Peukert pioneered this approach in the 1990s, which has subsequently produced valuable research.³⁵ The works of Kevin Repp and Thomas Rohkrämer on the ambivalent potential of social reform stand out in this regard.³⁶ The 'German forest' was itself a modern invention, a product of the era of nation states. This was true both as a mental construct and as a material reality. Although many liked to envision the woods as an ancient space and imagined trees as relics of the past, many also recognized that Germany's forests were orderly, managed spaces – a far cry from the mythical primeval forest (*Urwald*) of the Teutons. And as any modern invention, the 'German forest' had both its positive and negative characteristics. James Scott uses German forestry as the prototypical example of the 'high modernist' approach to the environment; the emphasis on highly managed fast-growing pine

monocultures delivered steady supplies of timber for expanding German markets, yet at the same time inaugurated environmental damage and social displacement that continue to this day.³⁷ David Blackbourn makes a similar point in his book on water management in Germany; human interventions in the environment lead to varying degrees of costs and benefits, both for the environment and for society.³⁸ While this is true on the environmental and social levels, it applies on the cultural level as well. The widespread invocation of the ‘German forest’ led in many different directions; on one hand, it helped stimulate a genuine early concern with environmental issues, and on the other, helped foster racist notions of the national community. Indeed, many different groups mobilized the concept for disparate aims, leading to competing claims on this national symbol.

Chapter Outline

This book begins by laying out the national discourses surrounding the woods, and then descends to the local level to explore their resonance. The first two chapters consider the broader meanings of the woods in the national context. Chapter 1 explores the symbolic resonance of the forest. An examination of a variety of published sources, ranging from forestry handbooks and geography texts to popular middle-class magazines and hiking-club journals illustrates that the ‘German forest’ played a dual symbolic role, representing the nation’s geographical and historical unity. Germans not only read about these symbols, but also developed practices around them. Tens of thousands of hikers, as well as countless casual tourists, took to the forests on holidays and Sundays to immerse themselves in nature. Guidebooks, tourist maps, postcards, guided hikes, and club meetings with slide shows, not to mention the proliferation of publications, all attempted to interpret the meanings of the forest for the active and armchair tourist alike. These sources led to the various sites of memory, be they aged trees or constructed monuments, scattered throughout the woods. Wandering through the forest (either physically or imaginatively) thus brought the national landscape together with the national memory in an activity that supposedly encompassed the entire German people. Thus, the idea of exploring the ‘German forest’ helped to transform the abstract and artificial concept of nation into a tangible and ‘natural’ experience.

Yet this idealized image of the woods as a marker of national unity should not blind us to the very real conflicts that engulfed the forest –

the theme of chapter 2. Timber formed an important part of the German industrial economy, and as such, significant private and public interests drove the increasing rationalization of woodland. From 1878 to 1880, the Prussian legislature, the *Landtag*, discussed instituting legal measures to restrict public access to timberlands to facilitate rational forest management, as well as private hunting. Liberals, Catholics, and others mobilized stiff resistance to the desires of landlords. Over the course of the *Kaiserreich*, debates continued to rage about the people's access to public and private woodlands. The nationalists and social reformers drew on discourses about the 'German forest,' claiming the woods were 'national property' and insisting on the public's right to them. In particular, they worried that revolution would ensue, should the state limit public access. Ironically, conservative landowners sought to modernize property laws, while urban liberals, peasant advocates, and *völkisch* nationalists insisted on maintaining tradition.

To juxtapose these broader discussions of the forest with local conflicts and practices, the following two chapters investigate two case studies: the Grunewald outside of Berlin, and the Tuchel Heath on Germany's eastern frontier. I chose these two sites in particular because they tend not to conform to what one normally imagines under the rubric of the 'German forest.' Studies of the *Heimat* movement, critical to understanding the German relationship with nature, have tended to focus either on the movement at the national level or on largely rural regions in western Germany.³⁹ Therefore, a study of woods on the margins of a metropolis and in the Polish-German borderlands would add new dimensions to our understanding of the construction of German national identity.

The Grunewald local study (chapter 3) reveals just how well the forest discourse fit with the progressive and modernizing tendencies of the greatest German metropolis, in stark contrast with the radical-right, *völkisch* image so often conveyed by the literature. Left liberals led the campaign to save the Grunewald for Berlin's citizens, preventing the state from selling off its high-valued forests around the city to real estate developers.⁴⁰ Progressive newspapers, politicians, and a dizzying array of voluntary associations mobilized the public against the government, circulating petitions and holding several meetings in which a broad range of public associations took part. Their arguments highlighted the need of the people, especially those without resources to travel, for access to healthy recreation. The scale and vehemence of the protests led the Prussian cabinet to offer the Grunewald to Berlin at greatly reduced prices out of fear of social unrest and an erosion of state authority. The

liberal champions of public access to nature succeeded in securing the Grunewald for Berliners.

Of course, there will be those who claim that left-liberal Berlin is the exception that proves the rule. Therefore, the next case study examines the Tuchel Heath – a forest much farther to the east, in a landscape dominated by conservative agrarians and characterized by ethnic strife between Germans and Poles. Here one might expect to find the forest linked to a strident and reactionary German nationalism at odds with the Berliners' campaign for greater public access to the woods. Yet here again we learn the forest was not a romanticized symbol of reaction against modernity. Instead, we discover the state using the 'German forest' itself – in the context of the nationality struggle – as an agent of modernity.

Over the course of the late nineteenth century, Prussian state forest policy became increasingly concerned with the ethnic struggle in the German east – the focus of chapter 4. Starting in 1893, Prussia began a program of reforestation specifically in its eastern provinces, rapidly expanding the size of state forests in the region. Developing domestic timber reserves, improving local agriculture, and cultivating the eastern economy formed the core of public arguments for reforestation, but ethnic motives came subtly to the fore. Reforestation would help increase the direct influence of Prussian authority (and hence Germanization) in this ethnically contested territory via two avenues: (1) the ownership of large swaths of land, much of which had Slavic majorities, and (2) the employment of a large number of local Slavs. These two factors allowed the Prussian state to directly discipline both the wild landscape and its unruly populace. Overwhelmingly throughout this process, those advocating reforestation expressed no interest in an aestheticized or romantic image of the woods. For them, the ethnic struggle was about modernization, and they deployed the 'German forest' as a rationalized and productive space, in contrast to the wild and unregulated forests left behind by centuries of archaic Polish 'mismanagement.' The campaign to reforest the Tuchel Heath cannot be understood as the invocation of a romanticized symbol of reaction against modernity. Instead, we discover the state using the 'German forest' itself – in the context of the nationality struggle – as an agent of modernity.

Chapter 5 addresses the role of racism in forest discourse. Contrary to the dominant view, racism did not permeate the woods in the nineteenth century. Liberal biologists projected onto the forest their visions for a harmonious and productive society, while liberals and conservatives clashed over the symbolism of the oak and the linden as the

national tree. Only with the onset of the twentieth century, a narrow range of authors, primarily scientists, utilized the 'German forest' as a racial metaphor. Quite in contrast to the cosy cultural landscapes imagined by nature preservationists and *Heimat* activists, these scientists articulated a racialized vision of the woods, in which struggle, not pleasure, reigned supreme. It is thus in scientific discourses, stressing their modernity, that one can best identify the origins of National Socialism in the *Kaiserreich*, and not in the more widespread historical and aesthetic understandings of the landscape. This sylvan discourse thus illustrates the uncomfortable ways in which tradition and progress, liberalism and conservatism, science and history, collided with one another, creating an ambivalent modernity.

Although my study ends roughly with the First World War, the influence of the 'German forest' persists through the present. Of course, as I have suggested, many older studies of the German relationship with nature have ended with the Third Reich, seeing in it the culmination of an aberrant, atavistic tradition that collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. Yet if one moves from a narrow focus on the National Socialist era, extending the view beyond the horizon of 1945, one quickly recognizes that versions of the sylvan discourse remain deeply embedded in German society. Like the Nazis, today's Greens – and a much broader pro-environmental consensus – link the fate of the nation and the forest together, although in significantly different ways. One only need think of the forest death (*Waldsterben*) crisis of the 1980s to recognize how closely Germans continue to identify with their wooded landscapes. While some polemicists have sought to discredit environmentalism by rooting it in Nazism, it would be more productive to think about both the blood-and-soil rhetoric and the anxiety over acid rain as two (very distinct) branches of the same tree. Both have drawn on the widespread sense, taking root in the nineteenth century, that capitalism threatens nature, especially forests, and that Germans would find a unique and superior way of managing that threat. For the Nazis, however, this idea was largely ancillary to their anti-capitalism and racism, whereas for the Greens, concern for the environment stands at the heart of their movement, alongside a dedication to pacifism and human rights. Nonetheless, both ideologies have their roots in nineteenth-century discourses about the 'German forest,' indicating just how ambivalent modernity can be.

National Landscape and National Memory

Introduction

When Bismarck welded together a united Germany in 1871, the new nation state lacked a cohesive national identity and continued to lack one for some time. This was perhaps clearest at the symbolic level. Although Bismarck has a reputation for manipulating nationalist liberals into supporting the new empire, he clearly avoided cultivating symbols of German national identity. Following unification, he delayed Berlin's architectural and monumental transformation into the national capital, forestalling the construction of a central emblem of Germany's newly centralized national identity, the imperial parliament (*Reichstag*). Both Bismarck and Wilhelm I satisfied themselves with Berlin as it stood, preferring to imagine the new nation state as a princely confederation headed by Prussia. Neither the imperial nor the state governments built monuments to national unification in the 1870s and 1880s; the initiative and funding for the gargantuan Hermann (1875) and Niederwald (1883) Monuments celebrating the nation came overwhelmingly from the bourgeoisie, not the state. Indeed, Bismarck pointedly avoided the dedication of the Niederwald Monument. Meanwhile, although army recruits were required to swear an oath to Wilhelm I, these oaths differed according to faith and from state to state. Likewise, German Protestants were never unified into a national church. Not until Wilhelm II took the throne and deposed Bismarck did the German state seriously set about cultivating a German national identity. Wilhelm attempted to redress the absence of state symbols by investing in monuments and state pageants, in both Berlin and the provinces. Starting in the 1890s, school curricula

became decidedly more nationalist, and in 1892, the German Empire finally adopted its first national flag.

But even Wilhelm II's grandiose vision of the nation remained fragmentary and incomplete. For instance, the German state never officially decided on a national anthem. The Prussian monarchical tune 'Hail to You in Victor's Laurels' (*Heil Dir im Siegerkranz*) continued to serve at many state functions, while some preferred the anti-French 'The Watch on the Rhine' (*Die Wacht am Rhein*). Only starting in the 1890s did the strains of the *Deutschlandlied* ('*Deutschland über Alles*') informally fill the role of a national anthem. Furthermore, Germany lacked an effective national holiday. As Alon Confino illustrates, attempts to institute Sedan Day (2 September, commemorating the French defeat in 1870) as a national celebration failed, at least among most citizens of Württemberg. The inculcation of official nationalism through the schools remained ineffectual among large segments of the school-age population, who were often taught in classes of sixty pupils or more in primary school. Moreover, by 1914 a vast number of Germans, if not a majority, belonged to organizations (as among the Catholics and the Social Democrats) sceptical of the official pomp and bluster. The divisions between Germans were too deep to be overcome by the occasional royal birthday or military brass band. The traditional symbols of statehood seemed to have been embraced quite late and to little effect.

This failure of a German national identity to coalesce around state symbols arose from the serious divisions plaguing German culture and society. Since the Middle Ages, increasingly powerful regional states wore down the central authority of the Holy Roman emperors, preventing the formation of meaningful national political institutions and instead promoting provincial loyalties that lasted into the nineteenth century. Since the Reformation, serious antagonism between German Protestants and Catholics (roughly evenly split) continued to rend Central Europe, and these divisions were only aggravated by the new state's campaign against Catholic influence in public life in the 1870s (the *Kulturkampf*). Economic tensions emerged in the nineteenth century as some regions rapidly industrialized (the Rhine, Ruhr, Saxony, and Upper Silesia) and others stagnated (most of eastern Prussia and southern Germany). Advancing industrialization led to the rise of significant social cleavages, especially between the working classes and the rest of society, and these social distinctions carried over into the political arena, laying the foundations for Europe's largest socialist party, the Social Democratic

Party of Germany (SPD). Despite formal national unification, the nation appeared anything but unified.

Adherents of the *Sonderweg* have argued that the state, along with allied conservative elites, whipped up nationalism to paper over differences between some segments of the population and stigmatize others regarded as disloyal. But rather than simply being a tool of the state, the forest discourse – and by extension, German nationalism in general – arose from civil society, and that public discourse about the ‘German forest’ was shaped by private individuals and associations, and not primarily by the state and its agents. Moreover, rather than being an instrument of top-down manipulation, the concept of the ‘German forest’ could be mobilized by a wide range of groups for divergent ends, as will become clear in subsequent chapters.

The language of nation first took firm root among members of the educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) in the early nineteenth century, and they intervened to create attractive national myths and symbols to overcome the German lands’ profound divisions both before and after the creation of the German nation state. Among these, the ‘German forest’ took on significant importance, becoming a critical element in the definition of the new German nation in the *Kaiserreich*. Bourgeois professionals and experts in several fields identified forests as an important locus, if not the only one, for the formation of the German national character. Foresters, ethnographers, geographers, historians, archaeologists, linguists, and botanists all contributed to the construction of the Germans as a ‘woodland nation’ (*Waldvolk*). These professionals regarded themselves as the guardians of the nation’s patrimony, both natural and cultural, and the heralds of progress and modernity. They regarded it as their mission to cultivate a new, national identity among the majority of German citizens only dimly aware of it. They sought to supersede the traditional bases of political loyalty – the royal houses and established churches of the individual German states – with the new nationalism. Their ideas were echoed widely throughout society, finding resonance in the popular press, in schools, and among hiking enthusiasts. And while several of these professionals were employed by the state, the impetus for their activities emanated not from high government officials, but from the realm of civil society. Private citizens and all manner of voluntary organizations – botanical societies, hiking clubs, and the *Heimat* movement, for instance – developed and propagated this new image of the nation. For the most part, they were successful, inculcating the notion of deep connections between the German

people and their landscape. Yet at the same time, the political meaning of this connection, often assumed to be uniformly conservative, was in fact highly contested.

The woods served as a flexible, malleable symbol, transcending Germany's myriad divisions to encompass the entire nation. For bourgeois Germans, the forest functioned as a green band that tied the nation's land and its heritage together. Transcending the constructed political, social, and cultural boundaries, the 'German forest' united a landscape and a history splintered by internecine struggles. Moreover, the idea of the 'German forest' helped to transform the abstract and artificial concept of nation into a tangible and natural experience. Hiking through the woods and visiting sylvan monuments aided patriotic Germans in connecting with the nexus of national geography and history. The 'German forest' served as a metaphor for the nation itself, linked together across both time and space. Woodlands rested like a symbolic green blanket over the entire landscape, physically uniting the nation. Thus many considered it important for the nation to explore this landscape through hiking. The hike into the woods was not an aimless excursion, however. The wanderer sought out particular sites, frequently connected with the national history. Monuments, both 'natural' and constructed, filled the sylvan landscape, evoking images from an epic past, when heroic Teutons defended a morally upright Germany from the wanton excesses of Rome. Thus, as a geographical marker, a space for hikers to actively explore the nation, and a site of historical memory, the 'German forest' provided the bourgeoisie with a new symbol with which to imagine the nation.

Imagining the 'German Forest'

In many ways, it is not surprising that the Germans sought the essence of their nation among the trees. Forests comprised a little over a quarter of the German landscape in the late nineteenth century, a figure that continued to grow slightly throughout the period. These woodlands, moreover, were spread fairly evenly throughout the country (excepting the relatively barren North Sea coast), generally comprising between 20 and 30 per cent of the countryside. The forest was an easily recognizable element in almost all regional landscapes, leading one forester to note in 1907, 'He who is asked what gives the German landscape its character will usually name the forest, [which] is hardly ever missing from any region.' This sylvan blanket covered Germany's diverse landscapes of mountains,

hills, flat lands and river valleys.¹ The distinguished anthropologist and geographer Friedrich Ratzel described the German landscape in 1909 as 'more uniform than that of any other western or central European country.' For him, Germany was a 'land of forests and pastures, of green landscapes from one end to the other ... The beech forests that are reflected in the Baltic Sea are the same as those that shade the ravines of the middle Isar Valley. Just as Westphalian or Lower Rhenish farms stand under oaks, so too do those of Upper Bavaria. All of the characteristic forest trees are common throughout Germany; only in remotest East Prussia is the beech not present.' Ratzel contrasted this image of a Germany united by forests with both the Austrian Empire and France, where the green hues of Bohemia and Normandy contrasted sharply with the white shades of Dalmatia and Provence. For Ratzel, these geographical 'facts' were 'furthermore not without political implication. While physical and geographical unity does not create political unity, it can promote and solidify it.'² This sylvan omnipresence helped secure the forest's place as a logical and natural symbol of a generalized, unified, and truly national landscape in a country otherwise divided by political, social, and cultural boundaries. Woodlands thus aided in the definition of a German national landscape by presenting it as a cohesive whole.

Johannes Trojan, the liberal editor of the satirical *Kladderadatsch* and a nature enthusiast, further identified Germany's terrain with its forests, demarking its boundaries with trees. In his 1911 *Our German Forests*, he presented a series of ninety-five photographs of trees and forests taken throughout Germany. Organized in no apparent order, they represented the diversity of German sylvan life. Yet beyond simply illustrating the many varieties of German woodland settings through their juxtaposition, the sequence of the pictures revealed an additional message; tellingly, Trojan accompanied the first photograph with a quote from the poet Eichendorff: 'The forest wants to speak.' But what did the forest have to say? Consider the geographical distribution of the first four photographs depicted: an Alpine woodland in the Allgäu (south), a beech forest on the Mecklenburg coast (north), a woodland stream in the Viersener Bruch (west), and snow-laden firs in the Riesengebirge (east). Was it simply a coincidence that Trojan's German forest resembled the nation as imagined in Germany's unofficial anthem, the *Deutschlandlied*? From the Maas in the west to the Memel in the east, from the Etsch (Adige) in the south to the Belt in the north, Trojan seems to have replaced Germany's symbolic riparian boundaries with arboreal border posts. Moreover, these trees did not simply mark out the four

cardinal directions; they also stood at the very edges of the *Kaiserreich*. In the south, the Allgäuer Alps divided Germany from Austria; in the north, the beeches could advance no farther than the Baltic coast; in the west, the Viersener Bruch lay barely ten miles from the Dutch border and the Maas itself; and in the east, the Riesengebirge divided Silesia from Bohemia and formed the backbone of Germany's Silesian wedge between Austria-Hungary and Russia.³ Trojan's trees thus marked off the nation's boundaries.

In addition to defining Germany as a forested land, many authors were equally adamant about what Germany was not. As Trojan seemed to suggest, if the forests united the Fatherland, they also differentiated it from the rest of Europe. While most acknowledged that Germany was not the most heavily forested country on the continent, many asserted that its woodlands nonetheless distinguished their country. One forester noted that despite Germany's significantly lower number of wooded hectares per capita than the European average (0.25ha versus 0.79ha), it was a relatively well-forested country (at 25 per cent of its area) when compared with its western and southern neighbours.⁴ And while Russia, Sweden, Norway, and Austria-Hungary had larger forest reserves than Germany, Germans felt that the survival of so much forest in their much more densely populated, intensively cultivated, and highly industrialized land was an indication of their special affinity for the woods. Ratzel considered it 'indicative of our loyal cultivation of the forest' that they continued to thrive in Germany's oldest areas of settlement.⁵

This sylvan environment helped nationally minded Germans define themselves as lovers of the forests, in contrast to their neighbours. In 1871, one forest historian contrasted the Germans' sylvicultural passion with the attitudes of other peoples towards the woods, concluding, 'None of this is evident in the national character of the Romance or Slavic peoples, as a comparison of the forestation of the lands occupied by these peoples with our own dear *Heimat* proves.'⁶ German authors revelled in their nation's supposedly unparalleled love of its native forests, as in this 1900 article from a botanical journal: 'No other people has internalized the loving sense for the forests to the same extent as the Germans, and nowhere are there such wonderful plantations of trees and well-maintained forests as in Germany.' By way of contrast, this same author observed that France, England, and Italy had no 'wonderful forests,' for lack of rational forestry regulations and downright 'ignorance.'⁷ Love for the woods seemed an essentially German characteristic.

Indeed, when German nature-enthusiasts looked abroad, they saw