The Role of History in the Construction of Identity: National Socialism’s Appropriation of German Romantic Ideals

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Through discourse and social memory, history is continually imported to the present to fulfill certain socio-political demands or perceived inadequacies that the present cannot address. In Germany following the First World War, National Socialism’s virulent appropriation of German Romantic principles provides an example of the past’s resurrection to serve the needs of the present. The significance of these two movements exhibits not only the role of history in constructing identities but also the power of national sentiments in collective mobilization.

The relationship between history and the present serves as a tool for understanding contemporary times and constructing visions for the future. By examining the past, people can create an “image of who we desire to be, rooted in our sense of what we seem to have been,” and these constructed, retrospective identities hold a high importance. Because of perceived threats to the German identity and cultural crises, both German Romanticism and National Socialism manufactured a re-conceptualized German identity, emphasizing the collective past of the German people. In the Romantic era, thinkers expounded the glory of Middle Age Germany, and urged the Volk to celebrate their shared past and traditions in order to kindle and identify the German spirit. Similarly, National Socialism claimed that the success of the German Reich depended on a return to the

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1 Sander Gilman, Inscribing the Other (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).
values of the Volk, values and spirit that would dominate for one thousand years. Despite the clear perversion of German Romanticism by National Socialism, these two movements exhibit not only the role of history in constructing identities but also power of national sentiment in collective mobilization.

The Romantic Movement in German history represented an “aesthetic revolution, a resort to the imagination […] It was an interpretation of life, nature and history—and this philosophic character distinguished it from Romanticism in other lands.” The term “romantic” originated in the 17th century, although it was more commonly used in the following centuries. At its conception, the term referred to perceptions of nature, especially those which “evoked distance from everyday reality.” The German Romantic movement passed through three phases from the mid-1790s until 1830, during which the territory now called Germany underwent several political and territorial changes. This period witnessed a construction of a “virtual nation,” through which art, language, traditions, and historical references defined a collective German identity. Moreover, this period was defined by interest in the search for knowledge and experience, stressing imagination and revelation instead of relying on facts. According to Freidrich Schlegel, to be romantic meant to live in the state of “eternally becoming […] It can be exhausted by no theory […] it alone is infinite, just as it alone is free.” Romanticism represented a total movement; it demanded surrender to its infinite nature, and vague, spiritual evocations.

5 Morton.
6 Ibid.
Opposed to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Romanticism derived its strength from an interpretation of history specific to Germany. For the Romantics, the Middle Ages epitomized the pinnacle of German society and, “disappointed by the course of history, they no longer searched for positive alternatives to the present in the future, but rather in the past.” The glorious landscapes, timeless castles, and noble peasants provided a sense of beauty specific to Germany. In essence, the Romantics “succumbed to the lure of history and wished to enrich the present by reviving the past.” This was in part because Germany remained fragmented and nation-less while other European states—such as France—were solidifying into nations. National ambiguity was compounded further during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), and the Romantics responded by turning to the past to rouse a unique German identity that they perceived to be buried, yet alive, in the Volk. Through the arts, the Romantics depicted images of nature and history and set out to create a “sense of hope for the future through references to an invented German identity, which they authenticated by incorporating past traditions.” The influence of such references passed through the ages, relevant once more in a war-torn Germany a century later.

Following the First World War and the failings of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), a German cultural crisis led to a search for “redemption in the Romantic cannon.” The national identity embraced during the German Romantic era provided a sense of national pride to a defeated and demoralized post-World War I Germany. The political embodiment of this movement, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) considered the

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7 Mahoney, 196.
8 Kohn, 446.
9 Ibid., 453.
10 Morton.
Romantics to be “the most important precursors of their own movement, as the first breakthrough of German national spirit.”¹² Gaining momentum, the National Socialist Weltanschauung* professed a timeless and traditional German nation by “calling up the German spirit from the depths”¹³ and promoting an ideology focused on the Romantic conception of German identity. Ideology, as a “system of ideas, values, and beliefs,” represents a specific framework for examining and understanding the world. It helps to explain events and conditions, and also provides a component of an identity.¹⁴ National Socialists desired to create a new man, a man who was culturally centered and who lived completely in an active state of German-ness.¹⁵ Xenophobic propaganda reflected an idyllic Germany, centered on one race and one blood. Discussing propaganda a decade before World War II, Aldous Huxley wrote that:

“Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The propagandist is a man who canalizes an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain.”¹⁶

National Socialist propaganda constructed itself around past ideals of Germany’s ‘greatness,’ namely those professed in the sentiments of the Romantic era. Of course, several other important factors augmented the appeal of the National Socialists


*World view; ideology
including Adolf Hitler’s personality, social conditions, and the unfolding politico-economic events in Germany. Thus, it was not only historical ties that made the propaganda so effective. Nevertheless, attraction to historical significance and the perceptible congruencies connecting historical ‘fact’ to the proposed National Socialist regimen won the devotion of the majority of the German people.¹⁷

Though opposed in action and application, both National Socialism and Romanticism shared a fundamental reverence for historical justification to both construct and validate their conceptions of German identity. In Romanticism, examination of German history was able to conjure a virtual nation, with foundations based on blood, language, nature, and philosophy. Similarly, in National Socialist ideology, history provided the resources needed to build a version of German identity equivalent to its perceived ‘greatness.’ Politically, socially, and culturally, twentieth century National Socialism not only reflected certain German Romantic thoughts and principles, but also mobilized them to construct a virulent form of German nationalism connected to a specific identity. Fundamentally, both movements highlight the power of the retrospective eye in constructing justifications for validating contemporary actions.

**Political Influences**

The political congruencies between the Romantic and the National Socialist periods illustrate the importance both movements placed on the conception of the *Volk*, or national community. Politics offers a paradigm to examine the relationship and the defining aspects of the interactions between people and their governing body.¹⁸ For both the Romantics and the NSDAP, the political views delineated a specific relationship not

¹⁷ D’O. Butler, 284.

¹⁸ Politics as I have defined it for the context of this paper.
only between the people themselves, but also between past and present.

Historically, the rise of German Romanticism coincided with the perceived threats posed by the extreme rationalism of the French Revolution* and the physical threat of war. As such, Romanticism helped inspire a desire for “political unification and cultural self-definition” in response to the Napoleonic invasions and the subsequent Wars of Liberation, stretching from the mid-1790’s to 1814.19 The German Romantics eschewed liberal, Western politics, such as the reliance on written constitutions, believing them to be inorganic imposters to the spirit of the people.20 In the period of wars and occupation, the future of a united Germany appeared tenuous; thus, the Romantics “nurtured a sense of self based on shared history, language, and customs.”21 Although not considered a political movement in itself, its general dogma had political applications, and many Romantic thinkers proffered political opinions. In 1806, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, in his Reden an die deutsche Nation,* affirms that:

“The first, original, and truly natural boundaries of states are beyond doubt their internal boundaries. Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself…they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole.”22

For Fichte, a political body is composed of similar, organic peoples, surrounded by the natural boundaries that their inherent

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* An ‘extreme rationalism’ characterized by the acceptance of reason as the supreme authority and the appeal to reason as an element existing separately from experience.
19 Kohn, 471.
21 Kohn, 466.
* Addresses to the German Nation
uniqueness creates. Since these boundaries are formed by the collective and special disposition of the group, the relationship between man and state was considered “intimate and highly personal; the state, an object of deep love and admiring devotion.” Fichte reached the conclusion that the German nation had a great cultural destiny and believed that the nature of the German people would create a Germany equipped for a significant international position. Similarly, Friedrich von Hardenberg wished to make the state more visible, a more prevalent presence in Germans’ lives. For him, the nation was a divine work of art and “should be visible everywhere and every man should be characterized as a citizen.” Thus, emphasis on the German people as a political unit highlighted the unique characteristics of the “nation.”

This construction of the German nation did not rely upon a modern constitution, but rather the traditional customs they considered divine, customs which should remain as pure as possible. The Romantics approached politics in a way similar to other aspects of life: through feeling and emotion rather than facts and rationalism. Adam Müller elaborates on this approach when he argues, “the uniqueness of human situations forbids the application of principles derived by the analysis of some other situation,” thus advocating the view that politics is a specific, cultural experience rather than a universal, transferable institution. From this perspective the state must not be founded on the adaptable will of the majority, but on the specific “temper of the people.”

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23 Kohn, 447.
25 Ibid., 449.
26 Walzel, 135.
27 Lougee, 639.
28 Ibid., 638.
Structurally, the Romantics, like Friedrich Karl von Savigny, believed that true laws and structures emanated from the *Volksgeist*, and that courts of law acted as its representatives, not as exponents of common reason. The laws of a people, like their language, were held to have a natural connection with the particular being and character of the nation. Laws that correlated directly with the moral character of the people were regarded as sacred, and as Müller believes, “the state is the intimate union of all physical and spiritual needs.” Both Fichte and Müller call on the Fatherland to awaken German hearts and minds to the highest good of the state: promoting the *Volksgeist*. Fichte, through his series *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, promoted the idea of nationality as a means for the German people to achieve their destiny and fulfill the idea of humanity. Additionally, in his work *Der geschlossene Handelsstaat* in 1800, Fichte maintains that “it is the state alone that united an indeterminate multitude of human beings into an enclosed whole, into a totality.” Economically, the state must guarantee that every individual lives “in medieval phraseology, *convenienter*, as befits him.” These ideas presented by Fichte resemble an egalitarian political structure, ensuring that the German people continue to be ruled by the general wellbeing of the nation. Thus, according to the Romantics, the political union of people living in a state demands a total submission to the customs and traditions of the people.

Like the Romantics’ political conceptions, the National Socialist political program relied heavily on the understanding of the German people as a timeless race, with organic connections to the laws and traditions believed to have begun before the dawn of time. According to the NSDAP, the *Volksgeist*, emanating from

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29 E. P. Walton, Esq., “The Historical School of Jurisprudence and Transplantations of Law,” *Address delivered at the meeting of the International Academy of Comparative Law at The Hague, 1 August 1927.*

30 Kohn., 451.

* The Closed Commercial State

31 D’O. Butler, 37.

32 Ibid., 36.
the people, composed “the keystone of our entire government and völkisch life.”

Similarly the NSDAP’s totalitarian state rejected conventional boundaries of status quo political policies and relied heavily on irrational ideals and emotions. This newly built state reflected the Romantic tendency “toward a megalomaniac universalism, a Grenzenlosigkeit* which manifested itself in taking things beyond their conventional limits.” As one NSDAP speaker, Joseph Grohe stated, “We fully open our arms and the gates of our movement … for the necessity to re-establish the German Volk community.” To reach the ends determined by the NSDAP ideology required a massive, total movement that mobilized the German people to idealize a common identity.

According to National Socialism, the role of the government was to unify the German people behind the purpose of serving a higher ideal: the National Socialist Weltanschauung. For the minister of propaganda, Josef Goebbels, careful coordination of the nation’s political will with aims of the state represented the essential role of the Gleichschaltung* process. He stated, “this government is, in the truest sense of the word, a People’s Government. It derives from the people and it will always execute the people’s will.” Through propaganda, the NSDAP aimed to actively weld the nation together into a single identity with the individual being indistinguishable from the community of the nation. Like Fichte’s proposed egalitarian structure, the National

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35 * Boundlessness
36 Stuckart, 377.
38 * Enforced community; synchronization
39 Ibid., 36.
Socialists affirmed the role of the people in order to maintain the general wellbeing of the nation and thus, similarly demanded a total submission to the customs and traditions of the people.

The *Volksgemeinschaft* held an essential role in National Socialist ideology. The community the National Socialist program envisioned consisted of a people who speak one language, possess the same culture, and “whose destinies were worked out in the course of a common history.” Legislation during the National Socialist regime embodied these Romantic principles pertaining to the purity of blood, the sacred German Volk, and language. According to The Program of the NSDAP (1928), Article VII, “the state shall make its first duty to promote the industry and the livelihood of the citizens of the state. If it is not possible to maintain the entire population of the state then the members of foreign nations must be expelled from the Reich.” Furthermore, the Nuremburg Laws on Citizenship and Race, signed September 15, 1935, affirm “the knowledge that the purity of the German blood is the necessary condition for the continued existence of the German people, and animated by the inflexible will to ensure the existence of the German nation for all future times.” Like the Romantics, the National Socialists constructed the German blood and race to embody the ‘true’ German identity, an identity inherent in the Volk and representing the legitimacy and raison d’être of the German nation.

Romanticism and National Socialism believed that national ideals should dictate the nature of governance. Hitler presented the critical role of the government as an arbitrator to allow the people’s state to evolve organically and to conform around the general situation of the present needs. In essence, National

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**Peoples’ Community**

39 D’O. Butler, 73.


41 Ibid., 115.

42 Lichtenberger, 87.
Socialism took to heart the sentiments construed by Fichte more than a century before:

“[I]t is clear that very soon a higher level of national honor and a distinctly more decided national character would arise among a nation so enclosed, whose members only live among each other and extremely little with foreigners, who by those measures maintain their peculiar way of living, arrangements and customs, who love with attachment their Fatherland and everything pertaining to the Fatherland. It becomes a different, entirely new nation.”43

The political unity founded on the identity that the NSDAP constructed through its legislation and propaganda corresponded to similar political perspectives in the Romantic era. In both epochs, the “community of the people, sustained by a community of will and a community consciousness of honor of the racially homogenous German people, constitutes political unity.”44

Similar to the political affinities between both movements, the social understandings present in Romanticism resonate in the National Socialist Weltanschauung and definition of social relationships.

Social Influences

The nationalism expounded by the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries relied heavily on the idea of race to explain and justify their opinions regarding the German identity and nation. Their contemporary society, bombarded by anxieties derived from Napoleon’s Europe, absorbed racial concepts and ‘blood ties’ to construct a social paradigm delineating the Germans from other peoples. Society, representing a collective group of individuals brought together by interest and sharing an understood set of values among themselves, occupied an important place in Romantic thought and National Socialist

43 D’O. Butler, 45.
44 Stuckart, 328.
principles. Both movements placed a high value on the collective good, but National Socialism in the 20th century exceeded the Romantics in the abolition of individuality by making the German nation, and its implicit identity, the totality of life.

In the Romantic era, thinkers conceived of society as necessitating a certain membership defined by race. The German Romantics highlighted race as a tool to build an identity constituted and derived from physically similar individuals. For the Romantics, the individual developed “in accordance with the common quality, as well as in accordance with his own peculiar quality,” and thereby lived inherently attached to the community. Race represented an intrinsic and undeniable connection to German ancestors which bound contemporary German society together. For Johann Gottfried Herder, “each ethnic group recognized its humanity through its consciousness of itself as a people,” and its unique qualities founded the fundamental relationship that connected the group. This social element was to be celebrated, for as Novalis believed, “only the capacity of the race is immeasurable. All plans must fail if they do not take into consideration the talents of the race in their entirety.” The ‘eternal race’ not only connected society to the past, but also reflected a vision for the future. For Friedrich Schlegel, “the concept of the nation requires that all its members should form as it were only one individual” and demands that ties of blood or common ancestry bond its members. Essentially, race represented an “indisputable testimony to common descent,” and the Romantics believed that the permanence of

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45 Society as I have defined it in the context of this paper.
46 Fichte.
47 Birken, 37-44.
49 Kohn, 457.
blood relations within the society would hold the nation together forever.\(^{50}\)

This idealized, historical community evoked a certain social stability and harmony that the Romantics wished to import into their present. Historical interpretation of the ‘true’ German \textit{Volk} formed the basis for this national community, composed of similar individuals. Such historical ties attracted the Romantic thinkers because those affinities seemed to guarantee the persistence of loyalty to the customs and habits of the people, and therefore to the community. The concept of individuality as understood by the Romantics required the individual to merge and identify with similar individuals and live a “full life according to their innermost emotions.”\(^{51}\) Generally, Romantic thinkers placed a high value on the individual and his potential.\(^{52}\) In his writings, Fichte asserted that individuality necessitated the absolute freedom for man and placed the \textit{Absolutheit des Ich} at the center of his philosophy.\(^{53}\)

The Romantics recognized that individuals composed the entire national community and therefore stressed the ability of improvement at the individual level in order to pursue progress at the national level. Through their writings, the Romantics “ultimately subordinated the development of the individual person to that of a higher unity” to preserve the perceived peaceful spirit of the past.\(^{54}\) The individuals who composed the nation lived, “conditioned by the peculiar traditions of the national community,” traditions which were rooted in the past and valid only for the one identity or people.\(^{55}\) The emphasis placed on the group in Romantic literature illustrated it as a living embodiment of laws and traditions. For the Romantics, absolute

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 460.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 454.
\(^{52}\) Lougee, 631-65.
\(^{53}\) Walzel, 54.
\(^{54}\) Reiss, 7.
\(^{55}\) Kohn, 456.
reason derived from the *Volksgeist*, thus the German spirit held ultimate authority.\(^{56}\)

Similar to the Romantics, the National Socialist program advocated a “national community which transcends social and class divisiveness through an ethnic unity based on ‘true German values’ rooted in the past.”\(^{57}\) Like the Romantics, the National Socialists insisted on the preservation of the “peasantry as the core of the German race” and idealized the past for the purposes of the present.\(^{58}\) Through its contentions, National Socialism defined the German based on racial identification; the Germany promoted by the NSDAP required a single race—a homogeneous identity—to live in a state of activated German-ness. For Hitler, the defining aspect of race was its power of hierarchical delineation, and he announced that the world “must bear in mind the fact that we are members of the highest species of humanity on this earth.”\(^{59}\) Through such racial doctrines, the NSDAP propagated the superiority of the German race, justified not only by reference in German history but also with contemporary ‘scientific data.’ The National Socialists treated the state as the means to an end—the preservation and maintenance of the “creative race in its purity.”\(^{60}\)

Under the Third Reich, race held a powerful position in society, and was designed and used to give individuals a sense of identity and belonging to a higher entity that was above rational criticism. Like the Romantics, such ideas appealed largely to emotion, but the NSDAP also drew on modern science to establish racial doctrines. Race answered only to fate; each person belonged to a

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\(^{56}\) Walton..  
\(^{58}\) K. Hildebrand, *The Third Reich* (Routledge, 1991), 44.  
\(^{60}\) Lichtenberger, 138.
certain race by the virtue of biology or destiny. The destiny of
the German race was believed to be contingent upon a
Volksgemeinschaft of racially homogeneous individuals surrendering
to the uniform ideology of National Socialism.

National Socialism demanded the subjugation of the individual
for the good of the nation. The NSDAP program planned to
develop, groom, educate, and mold a new type of man, a man
who found meaning in the German identity as defined by the
party. This identity, artificially designed to be “only one cell in
the organic tissue called race,” allowed the individual to find total
identification within “the will of the folk.” These ideas
paralleled with Romantic philosophies concerning the
relationship between individual and community: the individual
should live in a way that preserves and enhances the nation.
However, a significant rupture between Romanticism and
National Socialism lies in the identification and implementation
of the individual’s role in society. While both movements held
that the individual lives according to communal standards, the
NSDAP demanded that the individual should live liberated “from
the bonds of individualism” and acquiesce to “the subordination
of everything for the good of the nation.” Under National
Socialism, the community took precedence over all individuals,
and represented a total entity which destroyed all individualism.

The destruction of individualism in the Third Reich crystallized
the glorification of the Volksgemeinschaft. Bindungen an Blut und
Boden,* the notion of a “mystical blood bond between members

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61 Tal, 111.
62 Gerhard Rempel, Hitler’s Children: The Hitler Youth, (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 47.
63 Martyn Hausden, Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich (Routledge,
1997), 5.
64 Rempel, 176.
65 Tal, 25.
66 Hausden, 5; Tal, 8.
* Bonds of Blood and Soil
of the same national community,” resonated through National Socialist propaganda, continually underscoring the significance of community, and specifically, the community of the blood.\textsuperscript{67} For the NSDAP, the individual could only be considered one member of the whole community, a community defined socially, and territorially, as the ‘Aryan race.’\textsuperscript{68} Although the subject of race was present in Romantic thought and literature, National Socialism’s use of it perverted the Romantics’ original conceptions. National Socialism promoted race as a source of inherent unity and identity in order to justify the annihilation of different ‘races.’ For them, race was the fundamental element of societal identification guaranteeing the continuation of their race. The community created by the NSDAP, contingent upon racial doctrines and laws, completely erased the individual and any creative genius the Romantics celebrated in the individual. This surrender of the individual man and his peculiar capacities to a higher entity continued under the National Socialist process of \textit{Gleichschaltung},\textsuperscript{*} which attempted to unify various cultural elements to ideologically enhance the state control.

\section*{Cultural Influences}

As an aesthetic revolution, the heart of the Romantic epoch appealed to the German culture. As a movement, it claimed to unearth and awaken the latent spirit of the people and ultimately attempted to provide that spirit with the means of expression and identification. Culture embodies the channels of expression through which language and literature, certain traditions, and the arts appear to manifest a corporeal quality among a people.\textsuperscript{69} In the Romantic period, such channels allowed the \textit{Volksgeist} to carry a unique, inherent, and timeless signature. National Socialism also claimed to awaken the suppressed German spirit and celebrate the achievements of its Romantic forefathers.

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\begin{footnotes}
\item[67] Stackelberg.
\item[68] Mosse, xxxvii.
\item[\textasteriskcentered] Enforced community; coordination
\item[69] Culture as I define it in the context of this paper.
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National Socialist culture focused on identifying ‘true’ German culture “by blood and spirit” and distinguishing the “German from alien,” duties for which the Reichskulturkammer* was created.70 While both movements professed a return to true völkisch values and traditions of historical Germany, National Socialism transcended the demands and standards concerning the Romantics’ conceptions of culture by rigidly imposing the process of Gleichschaltung, which in the end suffocated the creative essence celebrated in Romantic times.

Romantics believed that “the original, moral character of a people, its customs and peculiarities, must be regarded as sacred.”71 The culture of the German people found expression through the Volksgeist, the spirit which provided a significant identification and also a certain authority. According to the Romantics, the Volksgeist embodied “great national memories” which represented a desire to perpetuate the past in the present, thus serving as a source of “preservation and glorification of which constitutes the most excellent task of poetry.” 72 The literature produced during the Romantic epoch concerned a variety of subjects, but focused on the mystical appeal of emotion. As Novalis expressed, “our language—it was very musical in the beginning… It should once again become song.”73

Romanticism attempted to resurrect Germany’s history through poetry and stories to make them not only more accessible, but also more applicable to the present. Language and literature, therefore, gained a central position in German Romantic culture and the Romantics highlighted its ability to bind the society together while simultaneously rooting it to the past. Fichte’s

* The National Chamber of Culture
71 Kohn, 460.
72 Kohn, 463.
Fourth Address illustrates the difference between the Germans and the “Other Peoples.” He asserts that “the German speaks a language which has been alive ever since it first issued speak a language which has movement on the surface but is dead at the root.” By comparing the roots of the German language to those of other peoples, he asserted that the German language holds the most authenticity resulting from its relationship to history and nature. For the Romantics in general, both the origins and usage of the German language were a cause for celebration for its significance to the Volksgeist.

Similarly, art glorified the past within the context of the present. Both music and painting flourished during the Romantic period in Germany, glorifying nature, emotions, and history. German painters produced visual images depicting the “German people’s affinity with nature, and a national character that evinced strength and spirituality.” This reverence for imagination, mythos and an idealized Middle Ages found an audience receptive to its mystic appeal. Considered and portrayed as an inherent connection to history, the German landscape offered a view into the past, untouched by modernity.

For National Socialism, propaganda highlighted the party’s connection to past German cultural achievements in order to offer it not only legitimacy, but also roots. By citing and presenting the accomplishments of the Romantics, the NSDAP concurrently asserted the greatness of German identity and culture. In July 1937, the NSDAP opened the Exhibition of German Art to display exemplifications of “Nazi culture through the instrumentality of visual art.” In the opening speech for the exhibit, Hitler said, “in speaking of German art I shall see the standards for that art in the German people, in its character and

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74 D’O. Butler, 45.
75 John Gage, ed. and trans., Goethe on Art (Berkeley, 1980), 104-112.
76 Mosse, 3.
life, in its feeling, its emotions, and its development.” 

For Hitler, art represented more than mere aesthetics, it embodied a way of life through its simplicity, morality, and völkisch sentiments. Extracting the nationalist appeals from the arts of the Romantic era, the NSDAP characterized its movement with a celebrated point in German history. In essence, it encapsulated and visualized the birth of a new order, and the rebirth of the German nation.

Similarly, literature and the glorification of language occupied a large element of National Socialist ideology. Many authors of the Third Reich, like Josef Nadler, wrote literary histories of German lands and tribes, attempting to determine the particularities and differences distinguishing the Nordic race from other races.

Similar to Romantic writers who stressed the natural, cultural groupings constituting a people, National Socialist literature stressed the importance of self-identification and cultural-historical developments. The NSDAP maintained, as Fichte argued over a century earlier, that the uniqueness of language represented “the index of all-pervading originality and superiority;” language embodied an inherent quality of German identity and culture, exclusive to Germany alone. By emulating the sentiments of the Romantic period, the National Socialists deliberately channeled a familiar aspect of cultural history in order to mobilize the German population.

Channels of German expression and identity were regulated by the National Chamber of Culture in order to control the

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78 Mahoney, 275.
80 The ‘Aryan’ race was a subcategory of the ‘Nordic’ race.
82 D’O. Butler, 45.
population. The NSDAP’s cultural policy involved the purification of Germany through the elimination of alien influences while simultaneously rejuvenating “true German culture to produce a vibrant Volk.”\textsuperscript{83} Nostalgia for the past, similar to that of Romanticism, manifested itself in the rejection of Western and other foreign influences. National Socialist propaganda blamed the post-war deprivation on outside influences and simultaneously advocated the “cultural purification of Germany and a return to a pre-modern völkisch community.”\textsuperscript{84} For this reason, the Reichskulturkammer tightly controlled the manifestations of culture to maintain and support the National Socialist idea of the total Gemeinschaft. For National Socialists, the German culture “was a reflection of the very soul of the people,” providing a means of emotional and passionate, albeit restricted, identification.\textsuperscript{85}

Despite the presence of Romantic derivatives in National Socialist cultural conceptions and standards, the tightly controlled conduits of German identity placed on every aspect of life sharply contrasted with the Romantic notion of individual freedom and soulful expression. Processes such as Gleichschaltung represented deliberate attempts to synchronize cultural expression in a way that supported the power of the state. Such efforts by the National Socialists present a departure from the Romantic desire of emotive freedom and identification. Essentially, instead of providing the means for the culture to flourish in Germany, National Socialism extinguished all of the ways in which the German people could truly grow.

\textbf{Conclusions}

In the end, both Romanticism and National Socialism revered history as a justification for collective mobilization. As

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} Bendersky, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 41.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 150.
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demonstrated through several channels of expression, the NSDAP’s movement and many of its claims appealed to the celebrated ideals of the German Romantic era. In Romanticism, examination of German history was used to manufacture a national identity, with foundations based on blood, language, nature, and history. Spawned from the perceived threats from France and the Enlightenment, Romanticism aimed to trace German identity through history in order to relieve the insecurities presented by Germany’s lack of cohesive, national identification in the early nineteenth century. Likewise, National Socialism was born of uncertain times and persuaded the post-World War population of the importance of Germany’s past and its unique character as a cure to its current crisis. Claiming to awaken and promote the values of the Volk, the NSDAP mobilized nationalist ideas of race, language, traditions, and spirit to construct an identity comparable to the Romantic era. Thus, twentieth century National Socialism mirrored certain elements of German Romantic principles concerning the political, social, and cultural composition of Germany, appropriating them to build a destructive form of German nationalism. Both movements highlight the power of the retrospective eye to validate claims and construct identities.

However, in both extent and means, National Socialism perverted the spirit of Romantic thought. While there exist common threads between both epochs, National Socialism operated on an entirely different level. Essentially, the NSDAP’s main objective “was to unify the German people behind a single thought and purpose.”\(^6\) National Socialism created and disseminated an ideology based upon Romantic traditions and myths, declaring itself to act above rational criticism. Additionally, the organization’s fixation on a dictatorial leader and its implementation of ruthless demands for conformity demonstrate significant divergences from Romantic thought.\(^7\) The oppressive


\(^7\) Lougee, 645.
demands of National Socialism attacked a fundamental cornerstone of Romanticism: the power of individual characteristics to enhance that of the overall group. The NSDAP’s totalitarian state demanded complete obedience, and while expounding its claim as the representative of the Volksgeist, the NSDAP attempted to destroy the particularities that characterize the individuals who compose the population. National Socialism’s totalitarian state fabricated an ideal image of a strong, obedient, and nationalist German man in place of one who could think and live based on emotions derived from his individuality. Despite its mobilization of Romantic ideals concerning the German identity, the invasive political structures and institutions of National Socialism crushed the individual capacities so admired by the Romantics.

Similarly, the NSDAP far exceeded the conception and application of race as understood by the Romantics. For both movements, race served as a tool for self-definition and identification; an inherent separation between the ‘other’ and the German. In Romanticism, racial identity centered on the peculiar characteristics of the people. While National Socialism still cited such arguments, the policies and ultimate use of race served more than just a means to celebrate the German people; it became a justification for systematic ostracism and annihilation of millions of people of different ‘races.’

Similarly, the cultural manifestations of National Socialism, while emphasizing parallel aesthetics, produced vastly different results. While the contents of nationalistic sentiments remain congruous between each period, the totality of the demands and applications of such sentiments by the NSDAP profoundly exceeded those of Romanticism. Over a century before Hitler’s rise, the movement started by the Romantics celebrated conceptions of the good and beautiful, relying on the past to fulfill the perceived void of its present. National Socialism shared the sense of Sehnsucht* with its

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* The longing for all which is wished and all that is lost
Romantic forefathers, but in addition to the fundamental, myth-like celebration of German-ness, the NSDAP not only rejected any elements considered non-German but also attempted to eliminate them. The various manifestations of such passions in National Socialism present a veritable rupture with Romanticism. In Romantic ideology, emotion should guide the actions of the individual, for it is such passions that lend life its meaning.

As a total movement, National Socialism demanded conformity and participation in every aspect of life as defined by its ideology. Everything connected to the conception of culture “was subject to absolute control of the state,” rendering the entire culture an aberration of what the Romantics celebrated. The creation and implementation of Gleichschaltung policies engendered a “complete coordination of all political, economic, social, religious, and cultural activities” in the state. Furthermore, National Socialism’s use of contemporary technologies, such as cinema and radio, allowed a more effective promulgation of its ideas. Such policies were thought to consolidate the power of the NSDAP by fusing every element of German life, constituting a total, controlled culture centered on the “common truth” that confirmed the supremacy of Germany. This ‘common truth’ manifested itself within every aspect of daily life, creating a totalitarian state which clashed with the visions of the Romantics. Nevertheless, the foundational arguments of national identification presented in National Socialism’s political, social, and cultural paradigms drew directly on ideas of the Romantics. National Socialism’s factual presentation of myths, such as the idea of race, glorification of the Volk, and reverence for Germany’s history reflect an idealization of the German people and identity congruent with that of Romanticism.

88 Lougee, 644.
90 Ibid. 36.
91 Alan F. Wilt, Nazi Germany (Harlan Davidsom, 1994), 35.
92 Snyder, 37.
Ultimately, the relationship between German Romanticism and National Socialism exhibits the power of collective memory in constructing salient identities in conjunction with historical events and ideas. National Socialism brought to consciousness the underlying power of biased historical interpretation which the Romantics unearthed more than a century before. National Socialism’s misuse of Romantic ideals to form and solidify its totalitarian state demonstrates the power of historical events in shaping identity and legitimizing certain actions. Through its use of political, social, and cultural elements, National Socialism fundamentally perverted the essential elements of Romantic thought. The NSDAP far transcended the celebration of the German people inherent in Romanticism, mobilizing Romantic ideals to elevate the German identity while de-humanizing and attempting to eradicate others.

History rarely rests peacefully. Rather, it is continually resurrected in the context of the present to fulfill certain demands or perceived inadequacies. As Hannah Arendt wrote, the past, “reaching all the way back into the origin, does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future which drives us back into the past.” National Socialism’s adoption and malignant use of Romantic principles to shape identity reveal that history has the capacity to significantly influence contemporary times, and moreover, that interpretations of history are not neutral. Identities derived from historical perspectives remain a powerful force in the examination of the human condition and how people address the voids of the present and the uncertainty of the future. To identify and understand such phenomena enables us to examine not only our relationship to ourselves and to our societies, but also to humanity itself.

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