

CHAPTER ONE

Nature and Nation

The early histories of Germany and Poland begin in the dark forests, viewed through the spectacles of a traveler from the sunny civilization of late ancient Europe, one who is well aware that none of his compatriots is capable of verifying his narrative about the forest's inhabitants. Nevertheless, like their colleagues from other parts of Europe, the German and Polish historians from the nineteenth century, having only scattered and dispersed evidence on the period, wrote extensively on their nations' early history, and with much self-confidence and passion. Moreover, this early period of their national past was apparently meant to be narrated according to principles of its own, principles considerably different from those relating to newer times. Still, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, historians quoted ancient authors who had commented on their countries at length (in the case of Germany, Tacitus's *Germania* was by far the most respected and popular), and drew far-reaching conclusions from their narratives. With reference to the ancient past, they extrapolated information and interpreted events that took place in later periods, and they drew colorful images of societies about which they knew very little. In short, in modern terms one might say their narratives were full of fantasies and reasoned hallucinations, based on premises no longer considered credible.

One may wonder why, having so little evidence at their disposal, they dove so deeply and eagerly into their national past. Obviously, the answer must be speculative. First, the nineteenth-century historians believed (as Hegel argued), that nations are living organisms.¹ They also believed that national history stretches as far back as one can trace any information concerning the ancestors of contemporary Germans and Poles or, for that matter, people of any other nation. This was only partly related to the so-called "national question," or the problem of national self-consciousness, which they investigated carefully and critically, albeit using a different methodological approach than that which dominates today's social sciences and historiography. The apparent obsession of the nineteenth-century historians with their nations' prehistory evokes associations with genealogy. The purpose of genealogy in feudal societies was not to satisfy curiosity or provide idle entertainment for a sentimental mind; its goal was prestige, and one's ances-

try needed to be ancient and spectacular from the beginning. The same principle apparently applied to the history of nations; in order to establish and deserve a respectable position in the hierarchy of nations, that position must have been occupied from time immemorial. Perhaps this was the legacy of writing history to please the tastes of wealthy families and generous rulers, from Homer to the times of absolutism.

Second, if nations were organisms, then all their fundamental features had to have been present at their infancy. It was then that the national character was formed, and it was necessary to find out what factors influenced the development of that character in order to describe it and understand its nature. The most prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment—Kant, Montesquieu, Hegel—believed that the natural environment played the greatest role in shaping nations: the climate, the landscape, the soils and the foods they offered. Differences between peoples were natural, because they were products of natural conditions. This view was the origin of modern racism, which was first developed by German authors such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (*On the Natural Differences of Humankind*, 1798); Ernst Moritz Arndt, who first articulated the concept of the Caucasian race (*An Attempt at a Comparative History of Peoples*, 1843), and Carl Gustav Carus (*On the Unequal Talents of the Human Tribes*, 1849).²

With respect to the historians whose writings are analyzed in this book, the consequences of this view were twofold. First, they unanimously shared it. As Julian Niemcewicz, chronologically the first Polish historian whose work is presented herein, put it, “Our geographical location, the air we breathe, and the customs and laws of our past, have imprinted their mark on us, as they have with other nations.”³ Moreover, they believed that the national character was essentially unchangeable, and they attempted to trace its continuity from the most distant past until their own time. Second, they viewed national character as the decisive or at least the most important factor in each nation’s history, and they also believed that the course of this history depended on whether the original national character and its virtues remained intact. One should not get distracted by the apparent inconsistency of this position: a nation could not abandon its natural character fully; it could only develop it and adapt to the given circumstances. If a detour from the natural line of development occurred, it was only temporary and inevitably resulted in a decline in the prevailing social and political conditions. Like a human being, a nation needed to behave according to its natural dispositions, and if it did not, a serious illness could be expected. Notably, this approach made the historians’ position particularly elevated: they were the ones who were to define what the national character actually was and what behavior best suited it. This was the true purpose of history, and to fulfill this task the historian, like the psychoanalyst, needed to go back to the origins. Henryk Schmitt, a post-Romantic Polish

historian, encapsulated this view in a straightforward fashion: “Any detour [from the path of national development that was determined by Providence] provoked numerous failures and disasters, which ought to be viewed as lessons for future generations . . . that the only way to recover from the misery is to resume the line of development that is appropriate for the nationality. And what is nationality, and what are the principles of its healthy development? This is what national history, if narrated properly, tells us in the most indisputable manner.”²⁴

As mentioned, nineteenth-century historians’ opinions on their nations’ early history were based largely—simply because of the lack of any other evidence—on the narratives of a few foreigners. In the German case, Roman authors occupied the most prominent position; Tacitus, Caesar, Ammianus Marcellinus, and Procopius were the most often quoted. In the Polish case, except for the famous passage on the Slavs in Ptolemy’s *Geography*, some remarks of Byzantine authors and Paul the Deacon were available, next to the more extensive information provided by medieval chroniclers such as Thietmar of Merseburg and Adam of Bremen. Information provided by the first Polish history writers, Gallus Anonymus and Wincenty Kadłubek, as well as that included in the northern sagas, were considered with much criticism.

However, there were also newer sources of inspiration for our historians. One of the central ideas associated with the Germanic tribes of the late ancient and early medieval period, namely their alleged love of liberty, was perpetuated by numerous authors of the modern period, in particular those who opposed the rising monarchical absolutism of the Bourbons and the Habsburgs. They included supporters of the Fronde in France, Hugo Grotius in the Netherlands, and Hermann Corning, a publisher and commentator on Tacitus’s *Germania*. Moreover, a number of Enlightenment authors, such as Montesquieu, Gibbon, and William Robertson, also praised the early Germanic tribes for the same reason.

As for the Slavs, Johann Gottfried Herder’s characterization achieved the greatest popularity. In his view, expressed in his *Ideas upon Philosophy and the History of Mankind*, the Slavs were benign, hospitable, hard-working, and peaceful peasants. This bucolic image was full of sympathy, but the philosopher also stressed that Slavs had no inclination for politics or indeed any higher forms of social organization, and thus even if they were brave individuals, they easily fell victim to foreign invasions. As far as the Germans were concerned, he basically repeated what the ancient authors had claimed: he praised their physical beauty, strength, loyalty, and bravery, discreetly remaining silent about their intellectual or moral capacities.

Herder’s opinion remained canonical until the end of the nineteenth century, when archaeology became an alternative source for discovering the history of the period, offering a different view of the national prehistory. German historians re-

peated Herder's assessment of the Germanic character with overt pride. In the epoch of Wilhelm II, when paganism ceased to be seen as a problematic legacy, the ancient Germans became one of the strongholds of German chauvinism, which was on the rise in both official propaganda and mass culture. In Poland, the "reputation" of the ancient Slavs (ancestors of the Poles) was more complicated. Romantic historians, and particularly Joachim Lelewel, the most respectable of them, idealized the ancient Slavs in the Herderian fashion, especially for their alleged love of liberty and their semimythical institutions of self-government. The next generation of historians, who rose in opposition to the Romantic school, took a more nuanced view: even though they believed that Herder was essentially right, they questioned the idea that prehistoric Slavic society was a perfect pattern to follow. In their opinion, the Slavs' alleged virtues were dangerously apolitical and made them easy targets for their neighbors' expansionism. Prehistory was considered a time of happy infancy for the Slavs, who were supposed to grow up in the school of history.

To summarize, one can observe two tendencies in the approach nineteenth-century German and Polish historians adopted for relating their nations' prehistory. The first approach seems obvious. Early national history was viewed as a distinct historical epoch, with its own dynamics and special features. While it could be viewed as particularly fascinating, since it stood at the beginning, partially hidden in time immemorial before "history," and as it determined future developments in a very special way, nevertheless it represented a very distant past. However, as professionals, the historians believed, and regularly reminded their readers, that no historical epoch entirely disappears, that all of them should be seen as a series of modifications and transformations of the problems originating in the past. As Kurt Breysig claimed in the conclusion to his 1,442-page introduction to the *Cultural History of Modern Times*, "It is impossible to speak about the social history of Europe without taking a glance at the earlier epochs."⁵

The other tendency of the historians was to view prehistoric society as the nucleus of the nation's history as a whole. The national character was supposed to have been formed during that early time, as well as to have determined all future transformations, simply adapting to changing circumstances. One could say that the nineteenth-century historians shared the ancient Roman authors' view of the Germanic peoples as "infants," an approach Europeans later employed to describe various "barbarians" and "savages." Like children, the ancient Germans and Slavs were supposed to have represented the basic traits of their character, which was deemed to have determined their entire future. For the historians to support this line of reasoning, the striking inconsistencies in national character, as related by the ancient authors, were actually convenient: this was the only way for them to serve as explanations for a number of contradictory developments and currents in their subsequent national histories.

***Naturvolk*, or the People Who Did Not Like Peace**

We begin our survey of the ancient Germanic tribes with Karl Lamprecht's *German History*, in which a century of German national historiography culminated in an apologetic assessment of militaristic and communitarian values among those tribes. When the Germans first encountered the Romans, Lamprecht claimed, they formed a political community of armed men—the *Volksstaat*. “An armed slave became a free man,” he explained. The formal leader of the community, the *Hauptling*, was also its main priest and augur, but his respectable function was also risky, as a false divination could easily cost him his position or even his life. As the Germanic people were constantly at war, actual power rested with the assembly of the free fighters—the *Thing*. This troop of armed men made its decisions by acclamation: shouting and raising their weapons. Most often these decisions concerned, as Lamprecht tells us, undertaking a military expedition, praising and rewarding heroes, or punishing cowards.⁶ Naturally, what the community valued most was courage, persistence, and loyalty—considered to be a specifically Germanic virtue. Interestingly, this ancient community recognized private property only with respect to personal belongings—the land was owned and exploited by all members of the community together—and Lamprecht claims that remnants of this custom were still observable in the German countryside in his day. He also emphasizes that the social organization he describes became “a foundation of German public life,” and he juxtaposes that social organization against the social realities of his time, which he obviously finds regrettable: “The prehistoric Germanic commune, which survived till our time, was not a community of owners of land or education; it was a national community of men of great hearts, bright heads, and arms ready for defense and attack, ready to respond to any insult.”⁷

Felix Dahn explains that the Germans inherited their bellicosity from the Aryans and that their life on the steppes of Asia and in the forests of northern Europe improved the “roughness of their souls and bodies.”⁸ Other German historians emphasize the contrast between the healthy Germanic morality and their bodies versus the physically and morally degenerated Romans, who, however, taught the Germans how to drink wine and use money.⁹ Lamprecht also informs us, with evident delight, that the ancient Germans did not have any consciousness other than as members of their tribe and family: as perfect warriors, they did not consider themselves as individuals, and they regarded women and children as their property. Paradoxically, he adds that women “were the only bearers of spiritual culture.” This primordial condition of a perfectly unified society of warriors, which, the historian argues, made them seem supernatural to the Roman authors, was, however, ruined by their own military successes: the fortunes of war brought them in contact with other societies and poisoned the initial harmony of the community.¹⁰

Eduard Heyck also emphasizes that the absolute authority of men over women and children was a particularly Germanic trait. A German man might expel, kill, or sell any member of his family, especially when “the Roman reached for the blond women and blue-eyed children.” What the Romans considered Germanic brutality and barbarism, he explains, was actually a symptom of their youthful vitality. Ultimately, according to him, they were “well spirited,” and their family life was an idyll.¹¹ In Germanic societies, Ludwig Stacke informs us, former slaves frequently joined the ranks of free persons, and if they did not, their status was still “much closer to that of humans than it had been in the Greece of Homer.” He also claims that the status of women in the Germanic world was much higher than it was among the Romans. What he apparently means is that Germans were not “frivolous and promiscuous” like the Romans, and so their women, although deprived of any rights, were still treated with respect. Another positive consequence of the ascetic sexual morality of the Germans was, in his view, that their society was free of feminine intrigues, which was one of the reasons for Roman decadence.¹² The rough Germans were not easy to seduce or manipulate.

Felix Dahn, who won popularity due to his best-selling novel *Struggle for Rome* (sixty editions between 1876 and 1912!), in his *German History* also claims that, although ancient Germans could have more than one wife, they had great respect for women, as they believed women had a special connection to supernatural powers.¹³ However, in contrast to his colleagues, Dahn admits that Germanic morality was not very strict insofar as male sexual fidelity was concerned, especially during military expeditions. He also argues that initially the Germans had had no slaves, and when they became familiar with the institution of slavery from their contacts with the Romans, they treated their captives much better than was the case in Rome and Greece, even though their customs were in general quite harsh: they practiced cruel punishments and human sacrifices, and they murdered sick infants and old people.¹⁴ Finally, Oskar Jäger informs us that according to Tacitus—to whom, apparently, we owe the entire debate on the status of women in Germanic societies—the German peoples believed in the divine nature of femininity.¹⁵

One should not be confused by the apparent contradictions in the German historians’ narratives about their ancestors’ family life and their attitudes toward women. In fact, they all referred to the same evidence—notably Tacitus’s mysterious remark on Germanic women’s special relationship with the divine.¹⁶ The real reason for the complications and variances in their arguments arose from their different strategies of idealizing Germanic society. One strategy they all had in common was to juxtapose the healthy Germanic morality and lifestyle with Roman decadence, immorality, and perfidy. What troubled all of them was how to explain Germanic brutality and cruelty as virtues or at least not to discourage the modern reader. The most popular answer to this question was emphasizing the “youthful”

character of the Germanic race, a strategy rejecting all possible criticism by placing its object, in a true, even if vulgarized, Nietzschean manner, beyond good and evil in their conventional modern sense.

A few authors did not share this apologetic approach. One of them was Heinrich Leo, a representative of the older generation for whom the Enlightenment ideals—Christianity and civilization—were still dear. In his view, the customs of the Germanic people were terrifying. They murdered sick or weak infants, and they even killed healthy ones when there was little food available or the omens were bad. They also killed old and handicapped people or left them alone in the woods to die, which, he comments, “we would find outrageous if we did not know that these people asked to be killed themselves.” They were, he concludes, “somehow similar to Thor” and “knew no sentimentalism at all.” The only excuse he can offer to justify their harsh and brutal morality is that they lived in constant danger and struggled against nature (such as dreadful beasts, including “a crocodile-like monster,” the remains of which have been found), their poverty, and the miserable conditions of their lives—in short, that they were “born amid a tempest.”¹⁷

Analogical controversies arose around the problem of the legendary political virtues of the Germanic people: their loyalty and faithfulness on the one hand and their individualism and love for liberty on the other. However, in this case the controversies were not purely rhetorical, as they involved some serious political criticism. Stacke, for example, argues that the loyalty of Germanic warriors to their leaders and comrades, incomparable as it was, actually hampered the development of German national consciousness. The legendary warriors simply knew no other loyalty and indeed no identity other than the one within their squad; thus, not only were they incapable of becoming patriotic members of a larger community but they were also eager to serve foreign masters, most often the Romans.¹⁸ Dahn draws similar conclusions about the “unlimited individualism” of the Germanic warriors, clans, and tribes, which meshed with their “incomparable courage” but was of little help in constructing a larger political community.¹⁹ Heyck argues that “Liberty has been the capitalized name of the Germans” and that liberty determined their history, like the *glorie et esprit* of the French. However, he also believes that German individualism was an obstacle on the road to the unification of the Germans, as well as a pillar of their regional and class particularism up to the nineteenth century.²⁰

One can easily discern the dominant line in the German historians’ reasoning: an attempt to explain German history in its entirety by referring to the national character as formed in the earliest period and as a factor that determined all future developments. From the modern point of view, this assumption seems bizarre, but even if we were willing to accept it the way it was employed, it may still raise some doubts.

First, it is astonishing that nineteenth-century historians avoided mentioning how little they actually knew about the Germanic peoples of the late Roman period, as well as how uncritical they were in assessing what evidence they did possess. In most cases, their analytical strategy was to accept the rhetoric of the Roman authors, who praised the Germanic virtues (implicitly bringing German historians face to face with the realities of their own society, which they disregarded), as indisputable fact or as the foundation for their own rhetorical speculations. The image that emerged from this operation, however, was quite often even more apologetic and panegyric than the original Latin version. Let us take a closer look at Felix Dahn's interpretation of Tacitus's *Germania*, for example. The historian quotes the Roman author's paean to the Germanic people at length, emphasizing their physical beauty, moral virtues, and other assets. He crowns his description with Tacitus's comparison of the Germanic people to the Persians, whom the ancient historian found to be the only barbarians who deserved a similar appraisal. Dahn then pauses and notes that Tacitus idealized the Germanic people. One should not credit him in this respect, however, as he immediately proposes to replace the Roman author's analogy with that of his own: the Greeks of the Homeric epoch. The reason for this is manifestly to draw an image of the Germanic people that would be even more enthusiastic and flattering for the national pride of the Germans. The Persians, whom Tacitus viewed so favorably, simply did not seem good enough for Dahn: after all, in the minds of the nineteenth-century German public, educated in the cult of the Greek legacy, the Persians might provoke associations with barbarism, despotism, fanaticism, and decadence. For Tacitus and Dahn alike, the Persians, whatever achievements they might have had, were still strange Easterners, in contrast to the Greeks. In other words, his remark that Tacitus idealized the Germanic people was a rhetorical trap, and its true sense is to make his readers distrustful about the Persian analogy, which, in order to support his own argument, he replaces with a Homeric analogy. To make sure that his trap works, Dahn points out that if one cannot see the striking similarities between the proto-Germans and the Homeric Greeks, it is only because the Greeks were "talented craftsmen" who managed to produce an impressive legacy in literature, sculpture, and architecture, which was possible only because of the more favorable climatic conditions in Greece. Thus, he leaves his readers with the alternatives of either considering Greek cultural achievements to be a minor difference, which in no way undermines his analogy, or to believe that the Germanic people would have certainly left a similar legacy if only had they lived in the sunshine of Greece.²¹

Copying from the ancient authors, the German historians rarely cared about the psychological probability of their accounts, or perhaps they just painted these accounts with the colors of their patriotic imagination. Let us consider one more example, to be found in C. A. Bonath's high-school textbook, which we may view

as a typical Germanic variation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the noble savage. First, the author discusses the legendary loyalty of the Germanic warriors, explaining that it was common for them to commit suicide if their commander perished in battle, as outliving him would be an intolerable disgrace. Second, he considers their other principal virtue: hospitality, which would go so far that "if a guest killed his host's father, he might feel safe as long as he stayed at his home." Finally, he suggests that their honesty made them completely unaware of the very idea of theft and forgery. As they liked playing dice and drinking, once they lost all they had, including their wives and children, they would play for their own freedom, and if they lost again, they peacefully accepted their newly acquired slave status and fully obeyed their new master.²²

It is also astonishing to what degree the German historians ignored the contradictions within the image of Germanic society they created and perpetuated. According to the narratives analyzed herein, the ancestors of the Germans were supposed to have valued liberty and individualism above all and, at the same time, to have been the most obedient and loyal members of their clan or squad. The historians suggest that these German forebears knew only the "sense of order" (*Ordnungssinn*) and that they had no individual identity at all. They were supposed to have respected women more than did any other peoples of their time and yet not to have considered them humans at all. It is virtually impossible to find any attempt to explain these apparent inconsistencies in the historians' narratives. As noted, however, it seems that perhaps no such explanation was deemed necessary, as the image they constructed of the German national character in its earliest—and therefore clearest—form, was essential and served as an interpretive key to the entire national history that ensued. This was a post-Hegelian idea, that of a synthesis embracing opposite poles of radically different elements. A structure as complicated as a nation had to be profoundly inclusive, hence the need to combine both the individualistic and the communitarian elements: hatred of strangers paired with hospitality, love for liberty plus a desire for order. The historians did not bother explaining how it was possible that all these elements had coexisted and worked together, because their main goal was to present them as seeds from which the future German history was to grow. And finally, these elements had to have been present at the beginning of the national history in their original, naked, and pure form, as they were doomed to be polluted and abused in the future under the influence of strangers: the Romans and their civilization, the Catholic Church and its cosmopolitanism, and various dangerous and immoral foreigners, the French being the worst. If the German nation of the nineteenth century was divided and uncertain of its own character and ideals, it was because its original virtues had been forgotten. The historians' task was to reinvigorate them and rediscover what was pure and truly German in their imperfect contemporary world.

Like many others, Lamprecht argues that military conquests, which resulted in captives being settled in German lands, brought about a profound change in Germanic society. The Germanic tribes now lived in constant contact with the Roman and Celtic cultures, they learned to cultivate land the way foreigners did, and as they ended their practice of constant resettlement, landownership became an issue. A new social elite appeared, consuming the lion's share of the conquered territories and exploiting the labor of the captives. This elite of "little tyrants" soon became the foundation of the early feudal system, and these elites usurped for their own benefit the prerogatives of public administration, such as taxation and conscription of soldiers. The more "civilized" the Germanic people were, the more their original values, particularly their beloved "German liberty," suffered and fell into oblivion. Thus, according to Lamprecht, the original Germanic customs and values survived in their purest forms in the most eastern provinces of the country: Bavaria, Saxony, and Thuringia, "with positive consequences for the constitution of the Empire in the tenth century."²³

The Roman influence eventually became one of the most problematic issues for the German historians, who alternated between respect and disregard for the Roman Empire. The aforementioned analogy with the Greeks, so dear to the national pride of the Germans educated in the classical gymnasia, was one way to escape the problem. The multiple and undeniable Roman influences were commented upon with numerous reservations and a distinct tone of melancholy, as it was evident that the Germanic people's original purity did not remain intact when confronted with the corruptive charm of Roman civilization. Kurt Breysig's work manifests the most desperation about this process, as he argues that the entire process of the Germanic people's assimilation into Roman law, culture, customs, and language, which actually denationalized a number of Germanic tribes (the Franks being the saddest example), can only be described as the posthumous revenge of the Roman Empire against the healthy peoples who had destroyed it. Only the northern Germanic tribes, like the Anglo-Saxons, who had limited contacts with the Romans, remained in his view uninfected by this poisonous impact.²⁴

From Rome to Prussia

One of the key problems of nineteenth-century German historiography was the question of the birth of the German nation. Indeed, it seems that the nature of the problem was specifically German, and the answers these historians provided had a remarkable impact on future narratives about national history. To be sure, from today's point of view the question may seem inappropriately formulated and motivated by outdated—and politically compromised—nationalist ideology, which viewed nations as virtually unchangeable monoliths. In general, modern histori-

ans tend to view nations as essentially a modern phenomenon, and when they do not refuse outright to discuss national origins, they typically locate them in the Enlightenment and emphasize that it was only in the nineteenth century that modern nations became fully formed.

However, we do not need to be bothered with the question of whether these nineteenth-century authors, who assumed that the German nation had been formed in the early Middle Ages, got it entirely wrong, or why. In fact, I would argue that the problem they had in mind was different from the one today's historians discuss when examining the beginnings of national consciousness. Indeed, the issue of the beginnings of national identity nurtured the nineteenth-century authors as well, and we shall see that they interpreted that issue in a variety of ways. However, what they actually had in mind when debating the origins of the German nation was the beginning of German history. Thus, what they were really asking was where and when the continuity of German history began and when Germans became subjects of their own history.

The idealized Germanic tribes, who successfully opposed Roman domination and eventually contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, satisfied the later German desire for a spectacular ancestry in the age of nationalism. Their glorious image was supplemented with a respectable ancestry of their own, allegedly reaching back to the Indian Aryans. However, as already mentioned, all Germanic virtues were anchored in their attachment to nature or, if you like, in the dark, impenetrable forests of northern Europe, sealed off from the poisonous Roman civilization. The forest was the nest of the people and shaped their glorious character, but it was not Germany yet. Once the Germanic people migrated to the territories controlled by Rome and formed the states that rose on its peripheries and its ruins, one could speak about "Germany." But which Germanic state, or state-like political organism, deserved to be considered Germany? A natural choice seemed to be those that were located on future German territory. But there were a number of groups that met that criterion, and picking one from that group seemed to be a process infused with local particularism, which the nineteenth-century German nationalists regarded as a destructive and backward concept. The powerful kingdom of the Franks, raised to imperial status by Charlemagne, was a tempting option. And yet it smelled of the French, the eternal rival and enemy of all things German. What was left was the Kingdom of the East Franks under Louis, created by the Treaty of Verdun in 843. But for some authors this country was still too cosmopolitan, as was the Salic dynasty, and therefore some historians considered Henry the Fowler to be the first truly German ruler—the one who was the first to understand what German national interests were and the first to pursue them.

In short, the origins of Germany were disputable. The patriotic historians were trapped by their own dogmas. They praised the Germanic people beyond reason-

able limits and emphasized their kinship with the modern German nation, but they could not, however, deny their kinship with other European nations. Their problem was that they could not accept a shared national legacy, because they viewed German originality and uniqueness to be the fundamental aspect of their nationhood. They searched for a uniquely German element, and their goal was to find it in the epoch when the Germanic people had just left their isolated forest preserve and intermingled with strangers. So their question was this: What constituted a truly Germanic state?

A good example of this approach can be found in Oskar Jäger's narrative about the Italian Kingdom of the Goths under Theodoric the Great. The historian repeatedly emphasizes its perfectly Germanic character (even though it cannot yet be called German). His analysis first concentrates on the political order, which is based on the personal authority of the ruler and is supported, but not limited, by a council of representatives of the most powerful families. In the council, he observes, "the Roman element, with its culture and education, was extremely helpful." Still, he stresses that the Germanic Goths, a young and strong people, remained—despite their intense and invigorating contacts with the weakened Italians—a caste of their own: a community of warrior nobles and a pillar of the king's power. He crowns his argument with praise for Theodoric's personal policies. First, he claims, the king did not persecute anyone because of their religion (as was the notorious practice during the time of innumerable schisms competing for the title of Christian orthodoxy). Second, he limited the use of "tyrannical violence" to the political opposition, which, however, was also both very tolerant and very smart.²⁵

My interpretation of this passage is that it was allegorical. A German reader at the turn of the twentieth century could not fail to notice an analogy to the Prussian monarchy of Frederick the Great or indeed the ideal promoted by Wilhelm II. This ideal was the German—that is, highly militarized—version of enlightened autocracy, in which a strong ruler, supported by the military and educated elite of the country, tolerantly respects his subjects' personal and religious liberties insofar as they refrained from any political activity that could undermine his power. The idea was to draw an idealized and timeless image of the German way of doing politics in general. In this context, Theodoric deserved to be called a perfect Germanic monarch: not because he ruled over Germans or in Germany but because of the way he ruled. One may ponder whether the analogies between the early Middle Ages and the Hohenzollern monarchy were subconscious or whether the author decided not to state them explicitly for rhetorical reasons, as he believed his readers would find them obvious.

German historians univocally emphasized the religious tolerance of the Germanic states established on the ruins of Rome during the epoch of intense and brutal competition between various Christian denominations (or schisms)—mostly

Catholic and Aryan. Needless to say, in the nineteenth century, when the last religious restrictions were disappearing from western Europe under pressure from progressive public opinion, this claim served as yet another compliment for the ancestors of Germans. It was for this reason, apparently, that historians avoided asking the question of whether the religious tolerance of the Goths did not in fact mark their indifference to the most hotly debated issues of their newly acquired Christian faith. Another typical claim, first introduced by Friedrich Kohlrausch in his 1816 German history text, was that the young and energetic Germanic race eventually saved Christianity from Roman decadence.²⁶ On one hand, his claim was a purely nationalistic idea, based on the assumption that all things Roman had been corrupted and were doomed, while on the other hand it was a Hegelian concept, according to which ideas are immortal and choose the fittest representatives, or bearers, in each epoch.

However, this idea was challenged by Heinrich von Sybel in his article “The Christian-Germanic State Idea,” from 1851. In Sybel’s view, the idea of a synthesis of Christianity and the Germanic political order was an ahistorical misconception, based on the study of feudal realities in the late Middle Ages, when royal authority was successfully checked by the Church and the estates. Quite paradoxically, and yet consistently, Sybel argues that the feudal order had been the culmination of despotism in German history, and he juxtaposes it against the idea of the *Rechtsstaat*: a state governed by a universal law for all its citizens. In his view, only a centralized and powerful monarchy was capable of building such a state and securing its proper functioning. He believes that feudalism, with its variety of laws embracing different estates and exercised by local lords or assemblies, limited individual liberties in a much more oppressive way than an absolutist monarchy. Moreover, the *Rechtsstaat* in his view is “a fulfillment of the Christian will, and an eternal goal of the Germanic spirit.”²⁷ Sybel’s criticism met with opposition from the Austro-German historian Julius Ficker. Ficker’s argument is based on the standard German juxtaposition of the Romanic and Germanic political traditions. The former, he claims, prefers bureaucracy, hierarchy, and centralized government, whereas the Germanic people are individualists willing to give up their love for unlimited liberty only in extreme situations.²⁸ Again, Ficker’s readers could certainly sense that his model of the Roman political order was related as much to the general image of the Roman Empire as it was to the French monarchy—the successor to Rome as the main enemy of all things German.

As noted, German historians avoided explicitly acknowledging that their image of the Germanic political order and society was full of inner contradictions. Nonetheless, they were aware that the legendary Germanic love for liberty was a problematic foundation upon which to build a stable political organization. One can easily see this in their debates concerning the emergence of royal power and

the decline of the semimythical order based on assemblies of all free men. As far as this issue is concerned, serious differences could already be observed among the authors of the liberal generation of the first half of the century. The next generation of authors tried to resolve those issues by underemphasizing liberty and focusing on the problem of the (monarchical) state power.

Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann is perhaps the most radical in this respect, as he argues that among all the liberty-loving Germanic tribes the Saxons were the freest, for they did not elect any kings but only dukes of war (*Herzog*), and this was precisely why they respected the law more than did any other tribe.²⁹ According to Heinrich Leo, monarchy was formed as a consequence of constant war and conquests, which were also followed by significant changes in the social structure: the class of nobles (whom he compares to officers) appeared, as well as a class of partially free former captives, tasked to labor on newly acquired lands. As the institution of the monarchy evolved from that of a duke elected in wartime, it remained for the next thousand years a specifically German tradition to keep the throne formally elective.³⁰ Stacke, in promoting a paradox, is typical, or perhaps emblematic, of the entire interpretive tradition in this respect. On one hand, he claims that the Germanic people had adopted the institution of monarchy from the Romans and that it proved a necessity in times of constant war. On the other hand, he argues that it was the tradition of liberty and the communitarian constitution (*Gemeindeverfassung*) that gave the Germanic people the motivation and strength necessary to oppose the powerful Roman Empire. He also argues that the monarchy emerged in tandem with the “nature of the Germanic order” and soon became inherent in the national way of life (*Sein und Wesen*) without, however, damaging the “popular sense of liberty.”³¹

Lamprecht analyzes in detail the Frankish monarchy’s process of adapting Roman institutions and cultural patterns, even though he insists, in an overtly nationalist manner, that it preserved its national, “West-Germanic” character. Nevertheless, his conclusions are pessimistic: the Germanic people proved incapable of building a stable and durable state based on their natural virtues and inclinations, in particular the legendary Germanic liberty. Like Sybel and a number of others, he does not see any contradiction between a powerful and centralized monarchy and individual liberty, and he insists that it was feudalism—that is, the rising power of the estates and local landlords—that was its main enemy. The Frankish monarchy, despite being the most powerful and splendid of the Germanic states, disappointed him because it yielded to the pressure of feudal tendencies, which successfully limited the royal power and thus the storied Germanic liberty.³² Dahn appears to be one of the few who recognized the inner tension between royal power and individual liberty. He solves the problem elegantly: in his view there was no difference between a monarchy and a republic in German history for a long time, as the power

of the assembly of all men preserved its prerogatives for a long period after the institution of monarchy had been introduced. Only the formation of nobility, along with the subsequent exclusion of all landless men from the political community, undermined the original political principles of the Germanic peoples.³³ Finally, Johann Jastrow points out the fatal long-term consequences of adopting Roman patterns in politics: the Germans remained mesmerized by the Roman idea of a universal monarchy for centuries and thus neglected to establish a national one, as other nations had.³⁴ As we shall see in chapter 2, this last point reappeared in German historiography in many contexts.

Let us now reassess, in their contemporary political context, the German historians' ideas about early national history so as to emphasize once again their rhetorical-ideological positions. The so-called "liberal" authors, whose political worldview was formed under the influence of the enlightened democratic ideas of the pre-1848 (Vormärz) period, stressed the alleged Germanic attachment to liberty and Christianity precisely because these were the values they desired for society.³⁵ However, in the post-1848 context, liberty (in its Western sense) began to be supplanted as the German political ideal; its replacement was a centralized and powerful monarchy. Simultaneously, feudalism, with its dispersed power and strong local particularism, remained demonized as Germany's most fatal disease. Thus, those authors active after 1871, when Germany emerged united and imperialistic, kept repeating that monarchy had been a product of constant war and conquests, but they no longer seemed troubled by this fact. What they found regrettable was that the early medieval monarchy had not preserved the original character it allegedly possessed and instead yielded to the pressure of the centrifugal tendencies of feudal elements. In their view, only a centralized power built up around a ruler surrounded by a military elite guaranteed "German liberty" in the sense they ascribed to this term. The legendary nature of the Germanic people—bellicosity, brutality, and vigor—was now being endlessly praised to establish a sort of ideal for the contemporary Germans. Militarism and autocracy were presented as timeless pillars of the truly Germanic political order, as well as the guardians of German liberty.

Thus, in a number of texts discussed in this chapter, one can see an implicit desire to imagine that feudalism had never happened and that the Goths of Theodor-ic, the Prussians of Frederick, and the Germans of Bismarck and Wilhelm could have marched together through centuries of national history. This is why the image of the Germanic origins in Wilhelmine society is often called a myth in modern scholarly literature.³⁶ This status arose not only because the image involved a number of fantastic elements that were products of early historians' and other authors' imaginations; the image also evoked a circular concept of time, one in which the Germanic society of the early medieval period was considered the ideal to be fulfilled in the future and the thousand-year-long period of feudalism judged a re-

grettable gap to be forgotten. As Mircea Eliade would have it, the main function of historical myths is to offer the chance for a national rebirth and a therapeutic new beginning by reverting to the original structure of the nation.

The Peaceful People

It may seem that Poles were no less fascinated with their early history (i.e., before the introduction of Christianity or rather, as we shall see, Catholicism) than were the Germans. This is particularly true with respect to Romanticism, which dominated Polish culture from the 1820s to 1860s, a period traditionally considered the era of the most spectacular achievements in Polish national literature, especially in poetry and drama. The most famous authors of the period—Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Zygmunt Krasiński—chose the prehistoric realities and traditions—as they imagined them—to be the scenery and motifs of their dramas and poems, which remained highly popular among educated Poles until the second half of the twentieth century. Obviously, many of their less talented colleagues followed them in this respect, contributing to the establishment of the idealized and mysterious world of the pagan Slavs in the Polish national imagination.³⁷

However, this trend had a different dynamic and scale than in Germany. In Poland and Germany alike, an uninterrupted tradition of cultivating and critically reassessing legends, chronicles, and other sources concerning early national history continued from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.³⁸ It involved some of Poland's most talented wordsmiths: from Jan Kochanowski, the most famous poet of the Renaissance, who was also a pioneer in critical studies of the medieval chronicles, to Bishop Adam Naruszewicz, the country's first modern historian, who spent a number of years trying to figure out what should be accepted as true and what should be rejected as fantasy in these accounts and who, deeply frustrated in the end, gave up the idea of publishing the results of his research.³⁹ As far as foreign accounts about early medieval Slavs are concerned, all that Polish historians had at their disposal were short passages by a few Byzantine historians (Procopius of Caesarea, Theophylact Simocatta, and the author of *Strategicon*, attributed to Emperor Maurice) and some more detailed narratives in medieval German chronicles (e.g., those of Thietmar and Adam of Bremen).⁴⁰ Some of them were also familiar with more recent Western authors' comments concerning the Slavs, and they were probably allergic to their suggestions regarding the alleged Germanic impact on the institutions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such as its parliament—the Sejm (an impact recognized by, among others, Gibbon and Corning).⁴¹ Finally, and most importantly, nineteenth-century Polish historians had to face the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility's specific obsession with its origins. Their origin story was based on sixteenth-century theories of the conquest of the

Slavic population of the future Polish-Lithuanian lands by the bellicose Sarmatians, who were supposed to have been the ancestors of the nobles. This theory (or theories) was enormously popular among the nobles of the Commonwealth between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, as it nicely supported their belief that they differed from the rest of the population not only by their social status and culture but also by blood.⁴² Modern historians generally abandoned it as a fantasy based on the scarcest of evidence. They also dismissed it for ideological reasons: nineteenth-century historians did not intend to flatter the nobility anymore by emphasizing their alleged racial uniqueness and instead sought a narrative that would be acceptable for the entire nation and that would preferably contribute to its unity. Still, the idea that social divisions of the past had to have their origin in foreign conquest returned to Poland as a theory developed in the West, most notably by the French historian Augustin Thierry, who based his studies on the histories of England and France. Ironically, the theory was adopted by some Polish socialists (including Bronisław Limanowski), this time not to flatter the nobles but to stigmatize them.

However, one needs to bear in mind that the Romantic myth of the pre-Christian Slavic world was, in early nineteenth-century Polish society, revolutionarily democratic, as it undermined social divisions that many considered to be eternal. To be sure, much as it was in Germany, the myth was inspired by a general European trend to rediscover and reevaluate storied national origins, a trend initiated by the discoverers of early medieval Scotland: James Macpherson and Sir Walter Scott (the father of the modern historical novel). Among their enthusiasts were the first ethnographers and archaeologists of Poland, such as the aristocrats Alexander Sapieha and Jan Potocki (famous for his novel *The Saragossa Manuscript*) and, most importantly, Wawrzyniec Surowiecki. Surowiecki, in his pathbreaking book *On the Study of History and the Ancient Slavs* (1812), argued that “in order to study and describe the Slavs one needs to be a Slav himself.”⁴³ He also suggested that studying the nation’s prehistory was necessary because “the latest generations inherit the attributes of their ancestors. The customs, opinions, prejudices, enlightenment, vices, and virtues that govern our behavior today are regularly rooted in the most distant epochs of our forefathers. Since this is indisputable, one can easily conclude how important it is to learn about the origins.”⁴⁴

As is evident, his appeal repeats the thesis we have already encountered in discussing the German historians’ narratives on their early history: that the national character is essentially unchangeable and that it is best to study it in its formative years, for it is then that it can be seen in its pure, natural form. The most famous apostle of the Slavic ancestors of the Poles, however, was Adam Czarnocki, the author of *On the Slavic World before Christianity*, published in 1818 under the pseudonym Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski. The book, which describes the “ancient” leg-

ends, customs, and beliefs of the Polish peasantry, coincided brilliantly with the eruption of Romantic sensitivity and Romantic interest in history. The credibility of the work was supposed to be taken for granted, as the author claimed to have based it on the stories he himself collected while roving from village to village, dressed humbly and talking to the oldest peasants he could find (as his pen name, which means “The Roamer,” suggested).⁴⁵ His enthusiasm for the legendary world of the ancient Slavs influenced such historians as Waclaw Maciejowski and Joachim Lelewel (whose writings we shall analyze in more detail), as well as poets, philosophers, and economists, who imagined that the rural idyll ought to be the pattern for future society, which would then be free from both feudalism and the miseries of nineteenth-century-style predatory industrialism.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, with the decline and passing of Romanticism in the second half of the century, the enthusiasm for Slavic prehistory also declined in Polish culture and historiography, whereas in Germany early national history remained very popular and crucial for the nation-building project that ensued following the unification of 1871. Innumerable monuments, paintings, novels, operas, and finally movies imprinted the idealized image of the ancient Germanic warriors in the German national imagination, making them one of the pillars of modern German nationalism. The final phase of their “career” in this role was under the Nazis, when all Germans were officially supposed to be as heroic, brutal, and healthy as their alleged forefathers had been, if not in the present, then at least in the future, due to careful racial and eugenic engineering.

Despite some efforts by Polish fascists in the interwar period to reinvigorate the Slavic myth (a move certainly inspired by the Nazis), in the popular imagination of the Poles it remained related to Romanticism. There were apparently a number of reasons for this failure of the ancient Slavs to occupy such a remarkable position in the Polish national pantheon. One reason, paradoxically, was perhaps the actual popularity and esteem for the Romantic poets among educated Poles, which lasted until the second half of the twentieth century: the ancient Slavs never emancipated themselves from their monumental shadows in the national imagination. Second, the fascination with the ancient Slavs was related to the anti-Western and antimodernizing ideology of native exceptionalism, which eroded in the second half of the nineteenth century in Poland under the pressure of technical and scientific progress, which made the idea of copying from the West accepted and unquestioned, at least in some aspects, among the Polish elites. Third, pan-Slavism had become the official ideology of tsarist Russia in the Romantic era, under Nicholas I, and it was exploited to deny the Poles any rights of independence or autonomy from or within the Russian Empire, which successfully alienated many Polish patriots. Finally, the essence of the image of the ancient Slavs, as we shall see below, was politically ambiguous and controversial for a number of Polish historians.

Moreover, in sharp contrast to their German colleagues, many Polish historians openly admitted how little they knew about their nation's early history. Some of these declarations are clearly accompanied by regret, and we can only wonder if their reasons were purely professional—as professional historians are supposed to feel frustrated if they are short of evidence and to rejoice when confronted with a huge mountain of manuscripts that no one has yet read—or whether they were also ideological. In any case, no source as respectable as Tacitus, Caesar, or Procopius was available, nor was there a story as inspiring and thrilling as the Nibelung saga. In contrast to the German case, the few interesting puzzles that were available for the historians of Poland's prehistory had to wait for modern archaeology to rediscover them. As Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, an amateur historian, journalist, political activist, and Poland's most productive novelist (his oeuvre comprises almost 600 titles, including 232 novels!), melancholically observed, "Until Poland emerges in its alliance and its wars against Germany, we have scarcely any information concerning her history but some dime novels. And even these stories are not available for us in their original form as folk tales, for the people have already forgotten them, so we can only approach them through the chronicles written in subsequent epochs, for the purposes of their own time."⁴⁷



We begin our overview with Joachim Lelewel, the most famous Polish Romantic historian. Due to the broad impact of his writings on professional and amateur historians alike, as well as his political involvement and international reputation, Lelewel remains the single most studied Polish historian and the only one whose legacy has also been extensively analyzed by authors writing in English.⁴⁸ There is no need, therefore, to reconstruct the evolution of his ideas concerning Poland's prehistory. It suffices to say that in his later years Lelewel, apparently under the influence of the historian of law Waclaw Maciejowski, developed a fantastic theory on the racial genealogy of the Slavs, which, to be sure, he used to elucidate their character and virtues. For the purposes of this book, however, it should be enough to focus on the ideas he discussed in his *Considerations on Polish History*, finally published in 1855 as an adaptation of the earlier French edition.

In *Considerations*, Lelewel's democratic and communitarian ideals, to which he owed much of his reputation, are already clearly apparent but remain within the limits of reason that the contemporarily accessible evidence allowed. Thus, it might seem as if the book lacked a first chapter—its readers are confronted with the image of a fully formed society that awaits the fundamental change that would introduce it into history proper. The narrative begins at an undefined moment that seems to immediately precede the reign of Poland's first historical ruler, Prince

Mieszko (Mesco), who converted to Christianity in 966. Eventually, the rhetorical effect of such a narrative construction is that of a primordial harmony, of a “natural” order that had supposedly existed since time immemorial until the moment when the country was confronted with the challenge of Western civilization and history itself, a confrontation that would question the values, structure, and indeed the existence of the original Slavic community. Like his German colleagues, Lelewel believed these values were timeless, and he wished them to be reintroduced into the social life of his own time.

What he values the most about prehistoric Poland, as he views it, is its alleged egalitarianism, epitomized in the communitarian political order, one that is based on the will of the assembly of all free men. As he stresses, “according to Slavic law and custom the captives were also included in the citizenry after a time,” and land belonged only to those who actually cultivated it.⁴⁹ In the scholarly literature, Lelewel is typically considered a “republican,” someone who highly valued the democratic institutions of the Commonwealth, in contrast to the “monarchists,” who wanted Poland to resemble the absolutist monarchies that surrounded it and finally partitioned it. To be sure, Lelewel was also a republican in the literal sense of the word, as he wished the Poland of his own day to become a republic. However, his republicanism should also be viewed in a broader sense: as a belief that a perfect society is a community of free people who express their will through free voting, be it in an assembly of all or in a parliamentary institution. As such, he was a perfect product of the Enlightenment and shared the ideals one can also find in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, or in Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation*.⁵⁰

As mentioned above, Lelewel’s history of Poland starts when the original idyll is endangered. The process of destruction begins with the introduction of class differentiation: the “noble class” appears and begins to exert pressure on the “free peasantry.” However, Lelewel does not provide a full explanation of the origins of this process. On one hand, he suggests it was a result of the cultural transfer of “Western ideas,” which included the authority of the monarch and the general idea of feudal social differentiation into legally separated social groups. On the other hand, he vehemently opposes all contemporary theories according to which the rise of the nobility was the result of a foreign invasion—by the Sarmatians or other Scythians (as Mickiewicz had it), the Goths (according to Naruszewicz and Jerzy S. Bandtke), or the Varangians (according to Karol Szajnocha).⁵¹ This question is further complicated for linguistic reasons: Lelewel tends to believe that the Polish word *szlachta* (nobility) is related to the term Lach, which is associated with a tribe bordering Rus and used as a synonym for a Pole, especially in the East, up until his own lifetime (it is also the name of a legendary early Polish ruler). This might suggest that the social divisions among Poles had their origin in a sort of conquest by

indigenes. However, Lelewel does not elaborate on this, and he insists that the nobility and the peasants had originally been one people and that the former's aspiration to attain a special status within society had been a usurpation in light of native traditions and law.⁵² His analysis of the process whereby social differences arise is eventually based on his readings of later codes and legal arrangements. Noting the subsequent legal changes that strengthened the position of great landowners and the monarch vis-à-vis the ever less free peasants, he concluded that this process had its origins in prehistoric times and thus that there was once a time when all men had been free and equal.

Lelewel is not fully coherent in his analysis of the rise of the monarchical power either. On one hand, he claims that the despotism of the rulers of the first Polish dynasty (the Piasts), who considered the entire country to be their property, went "against the Slavic spirit, against the principles that had been observed for centuries." On the other hand, he also disapproves of the decline of monarchical prerogatives from the twelfth century on, as well as the simultaneous rise in the position and influence of the great landowners and holders of local offices. In this context, and in sharp contrast to what he would write on the partitions of Poland, Lelewel argues that "they say the despotism of one is better than the despotism of the plenty, who oppress the people eagerly and carefully. This is what developed in Poland."⁵³

Lelewel consistently presents these two issues—the monarchical despotism and the oppression of the poor by the rich—as Poland's main civic ills throughout the centuries, up to the partitions of the Commonwealth. He also emphasizes that the source of the problem was in imitating the West or simply yielding to the pressure of Western patterns and, consequently, neglecting native traditions: "I have said many a time, as others have argued, that since Christianity was introduced in Poland due to the progress of Western civilization, the people have been losing their original freedom, and their rights have been regularly violated and discredited."⁵⁴

The "others" he had in mind were most likely Chodakowski and Maciejewski. In order to support their claim, they developed an original theory explaining the nature of the popular turmoil in the first half of the eleventh century, when a number of churches had been destroyed, allegedly by pagans who had refused to accept the new religion of the country. According to their theory, which was also based on some archaeological findings (and therefore has remained a matter of discussion until today), before Poland officially accepted Christianity in its Latin rite in 966, it had already been present in the country in the Byzantine-Slavic rite. This earlier rite was supposed to have better fit the customs of the country and to have been more popular among the simple folk, and thus many of the internal conflicts of the time, known from the later chronicles as the dynastic struggle for power, were supposed to have actually mirrored the rivalry between the "elitist" Latin form of worship and the "popular" Slavic rite.⁵⁵

It seems remarkable that in his *Considerations* Lelewel draws his most elaborate image of primordial Polish society in a passage concerning the end of the sixteenth century—the epoch when, in his view, the original Polish institutions and social order finally degenerated. In order to explain what had been lost, he tries to return to the beginning. His analysis is both strikingly naïve and insightful at the same time. On one hand, he constructs a poetic image of a primordial idyll: he emphasizes his beloved people's love for liberty and nationality, their hospitality and generosity, their limited inventiveness, and their talent for imitation. Finally, he argues that “because of their peaceful and honeyed disposition, it happened a few times they were forced to kneel down and yield to foreign pressure; one cannot say, however, it happened owing to their ineptitude.” On the other hand, Lelewel remarks that he is himself incapable of grasping the greatness of their virtues, for they represent a world that has been lost due to the progress of civilization and its detestable concepts. To be sure, he does not employ this meta-argument to question his own claims but to defend his paradise lost against any possible accusations. “The mediocrity of their talents is illusive, for their customs and ideas do not match what the foreign civilization promotes,” he writes, whereas “what are considered to be their flaws, are actually a result of their qualities and their virtue.”⁵⁶ This two-faced strategy may seem symptomatic of the historical epistemology of the age: in one moment Lelewel, like Ranke, argues that all epochs should be evaluated according to their own standards, while in another he pursues his own standards as universal.

For Polish historians of subsequent generations, the issue of the originality and exceptionality of the native culture of the pre-Christian population of Poland was of relatively minor importance. Nevertheless, they unanimously repeated the main points of the characteristics of the Slavs as formulated by Herder, in exactly the same manner that their German colleagues reproduced the characteristics of proto-Germans as constructed by Tacitus. Needless to say, they also reinterpreted them according to their own political and ideological values.

Let us begin with the aspects they generally agree upon. According to Henryk Schmitt, “What distinguished [the prehistoric Poles], next to their peaceful nature, was their great love for personal freedom, which they preferred over the security of the community.”⁵⁷ In summarizing Polish history up to the twelfth century, Schmitt argues that the original Slavic egalitarianism was in continuous decline but that the situation of the lower classes was still better than in the West. This is supported by rather incoherent reasoning, according to which the Poles did not know the institution of slavery, while the Jewish migration to Poland was to be lamented because the Jews traded slaves.⁵⁸

Michał Bobrzyński is the only one to argue that the Slavs had lived a nomadic life before they settled down and proved their talents for agriculture and apicul-

ture. He then continues with the standard claim that “the Slavs knew no respect for despotic authority and law, nor the strength that results from unity and organization.” Reasoning like the ancient authors, he explains this by their relative wealth and prosperity and the fact that they were not confronted with enough dangerous challenges. As a result, he concludes critically, their “peaceful, noble, and hospitable nature” degenerated because of their comfortable existence, which made them “careless, joyful, sluggish, and inclined toward constant dancing and singing.” Like others, Bobrzyński emphasizes the paternalistic structure of Slavic society and the Slavs’ extraordinary respect for the elderly and for women (whose position in society, he stresses, was much higher than it was among Germanic peoples).⁵⁹ Analogically, Władysław Smoleński uses colorful terms to describe the bucolic qualities of the ancient Slavs’ rural way of life, concluding, however, that they had no inclination for war and proved incapable of building a stable political organization, because of their “carelessness, sluggishness, and disorderly nature.”⁶⁰

In short, the ancient Slavs resembled Rousseau’s noble savage, whereas the ancient Germans lived in Hobbes’s natural conditions, which made them brutal and aggressive. In both images, nature is the major interpretive key, and its uses are openly tautological, combining ethical and epistemological as well as explanatory and apologetic functions, and, most importantly, masking the inner incoherencies in the argumentation.

The most troubling aspect of the Herderian image of Slavic society was its alleged anarchism and its inability to resist the foreign aggressions that resulted from it. As we shall see shortly, Polish historians invariably saw this problem in the context of German-Polish military conflicts in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They accepted the basic points of racial stereotyping—according to which Germans were aggressive and Slavs peaceful by nature—and thus further complicated the problem for those authors trying to instill national pride or even simply to explain the intensity of the conflict. Another fundamental issue that caused interpretive difficulties with respect to the Slavs’ alleged anarchism and peacefulness was the question of how they managed to build any sort of durable political organization. There was, after all, a striking discrepancy in the sources that determined their reasoning: according to the ancient authors, the Slavic people had been individualists inclined toward anarchy, hardly capable of tolerating any centralized authority; according to medieval chronicles, however, the Poland of the tenth through twelfth centuries was a despotic monarchy ruled by a Piast dynasty that considered the entire country to be its property and did not tolerate any political opposition. How Poland became such a monarchy was a problem for which the evidence provided no answer.

Polish historians answer this question in a manner parallel to what we have become familiar with in analyzing German historiography. First, they unanimously

agree that the idea of monarchical rule was imported from the West. Second, it was adopted by the Slavs as a sheer necessity, in response to foreign military pressure. The parallel seems remarkable since, as noted, the Polish historians had virtually no evidence to support their reasoning in this respect, and their entire interpretive effort was eventually to make the two incoherent images consistent. A few comments are noteworthy. Bobrzyński, the most devoted advocate of Westernization among our historians, argues with clearly expressed regret that the entire process of building monarchical structures of power among the Slavs “was of course very slow”—too slow to save the West Slavs from German military pressure. Józef Szuski, in contrast, claims that the process was quick, owing to the “natural” conservatism of the Slavs (as if monarchy were a conservative institution by definition). He also adds, evidently having future developments in mind, that things did not go as they should have: the building of a healthy paternalistic monarchy was incomplete, and it soon degenerated toward “feverish anarchy” in Poland and “slavish passivity” in Russia.⁶¹

Clearly, the latter argument constitutes a parallel with the German historians’ attempts to distinguish, as early as possible, the Germanic people who were to become Germans in the future from the future aliens, particularly the French. In contrast to the German historians, who desperately tried to assess the level of the demonized Roman impact on various Germanic tribes in order to explain the future antagonism between them, the Polish historians had a more precise argument at their disposal: the difference between the Latin and the Greek forms of worship. However, their views on the question of the internal divisions in the Slavic world were in fact highly ambivalent. This ambivalence deserves a closer look, for it perfectly mirrors various historians’ ideological involvements.

Lelewel, as an enthusiast of Slavic nativism and a democrat, is highly critical of the developments in Rus. The original Slavic idyll, in his view, was first undermined by the Varangian conquest, which introduced the element of brutality and violence into the hitherto peaceful country. Subsequently, Rus fell under the influence of Byzantium, from which a cult of despotic power was imported. Interestingly, despite his strongly anti-Western stance, when discussing the Byzantine impact Lelewel employs the Latin stereotypes regarding Greek decadence, perfidy, and despotism, which he despised the most, especially where the subjugation of religion to political power is concerned. In this context, he even appreciates the role of the Catholic clergy, which, despite being a Westernizing factor, opposed the Polish monarchs’ appetite for unlimited power.⁶² In his later years as an émigré in Brussels after fleeing the oppression of the Russian tsar, Lelewel developed a theory that allowed him to escape the contradiction inherent in his sentiment for the Slavs and his animosity toward contemporary Russia. According to his theory, Muscovy essentially lost its Slavic character in consequence of the Mongolian

conquest and thus was not really a successor of the lost civilization of Kievan Rus in the cultural or political sense.

Karol Boromeusz Hoffman and Józef Szujski emphasize the religious division among the Slavs more overtly, highlighting Catholicism as a factor that contributed to the Westernization of Poland. Hoffman is perhaps the only one to openly and approvingly claim that by adopting Christianity in the Latin rite, all pagans “rejected their native customs and laws and accepted the principles of the Church.”⁶³ Szujski, the most devout among the Polish historians examined here, is even more effusive and explicit about the advantages of adopting Catholicism. He argues straightforwardly in the name of both history and the true religion: “Joining the Catholic Roman Church decided the question of participation in the cause of the Roman Catholic civilization and historical progress, whereas rejecting it would have constituted an enemy of progress, and a negative historical factor. This was the most important issue of the time, which clearly surpassed all others.”⁶⁴

Finally, the most anticlerical of the Polish historians under analysis, Władysław Smoleński, is the one who expresses the most regret about the division of the Slavs into two religious camps and, more scandalously, also raises some doubts as to whether Poland’s choice was the right one. First, he reminds his readers that at the time when Poland adopted Christianity, the Western Latin world represented a lower level of civilization as compared to the more sophisticated Byzantium, which was also friendlier and more flexible toward the Slavs, as demonstrated by the use of separate alphabets and rituals, whereas Rome preferred converting its subjects by pure force. It was much later, he claims, when the East and South Slavs, surrounded by “barbarians,” degenerated into backwardness and ignorance. Thus, he concludes, it was tragic that the struggle against fellow Slavs in the name of Western civilization filled up so many chapters of Polish history.⁶⁵

Furor Teutonicus

Finally, let us take a closer look at one more problem that, according to Polish historians, was to determine Polish history from its beginning: the German-Polish antagonism. As a military aggressor and the main provider of cultural and technological innovations, Germany played a parallel role in Polish historiography to that of Rome in the German one. Consequently, one of the main interpretive challenges Polish historians faced in constructing their narratives was how to interpret the preponderant German influence on Polish culture and politics in the early stages of its national history. This is not to say all of our historians were enemies of all things German. However, they had to acknowledge that in the first stages of its existence Poland was constantly in danger of being dominated by its powerful neighbor, from whom it imported cultural patterns, technology, and, finally, numerous

settlers as well. Thus, anti-German sentiment was above all viewed as a question of preserving the national identity and its most fragile element: national pride.

Finally, anti-German sentiment was also strongly present in the evidence the Polish historians had at their disposal, as part of the legacy of the century-and-a-half-long conflict between the Polish kingdom and the Teutonic Order over Pomerania (1308–1466). Apart from numerous military campaigns, the conflict was also manifested in a series of trials in the papal tribunal and councils (particularly in Constance, 1414–18) and was accompanied by an almost incessant flow of diplomatic memoranda and propagandistic pamphlets. The task of discrediting the Teutonic knights' pretensions and demonizing their methods was one that attracted many of Poland's most talented wordsmiths during the late medieval and early modern period, including, for example, Jan Długosz, author of the monumental *Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland*—a must-read for all Polish historians. Since the Teutonic knights were popularly viewed (in both Germany and Poland) as essentially German (or, more precisely, as predecessors of Hohenzollern Prussia), the anti-German sentiment became a pillar of one of the most respected and ancient Polish intellectual traditions, which the nineteenth-century historians could hardly ignore.

Joachim Lelewel followed it the most faithfully, or perhaps most obsessively, among the historians analyzed. His passionate prejudice against all things German may seem paradoxical, as he did not live to the age of aggressive nationalism, and he was not chauvinistic as far as other nationalities were concerned, despite his love for his native Polish culture. It was the Germans, in his view, who were primarily responsible for undermining and polluting the original purity of Polish customs and laws. The list of sins he ascribes to them is long and colorful and includes, *inter alia*, promoting the feudal concepts of social differentiation and the ambitions of the rich and powerful, as expressed in the importation of their habits and practices, such as dueling. Lelewel neither hides nor denies that, as a result of the massive influx of German settlers into Poland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, German culture and law became predominant features in the majority of Polish cities. He simply finds this fact lamentable, an example of how ethnic "otherness" undermined national unity, complementing the growing class divisions. His final and most serious accusation against the German burghers of medieval Poland is that they "kept various contacts" with their fatherland (for example, they appealed to Magdeburg, Halle, and Lubeck when legal controversies arose), which eventually "posed a danger to the country"—in other words, smelled of high treason. Notably, despite his love for the purity of original Polish culture, he seems sympathetic, if not enthusiastic, about other immigrants to Poland; Jews, Roma, Armenians, Czechs, Italians, and Spaniards are all viewed as welcomed guests, and the historian recalls their settlement in Poland proudly, as evidence

of the country's good reputation and wealth. In contrast, he claims, "the alarming influx of German foes deserves caution."⁶⁶ And indeed, it seems that throughout his entire oeuvre Germans are never mentioned without some alarming or disapproving comment attached.

Henryk Schmitt generalizes Lelewel's approach: in his narrative the former's anti-German obsession involves other nationalities, too, particularly Jews. Obviously, Schmitt also regrets that so many representatives of these "alien" races settled in Poland in the medieval period, which he views as the result of the coherent yet horrendous policy of the Piast rulers, who offered the newcomers numerous privileges and legal autonomy. Eventually his assessment of Polish monarchs is correlated with their military successes in conflicts against neighbors, especially against Germans. One can clearly see how much attention he attaches to this fundamental issue of national pride by reading his emotional comment concerning a singular opinion, which he found in a contemporary German chronicle, that the Polish Prince Boleslaus IV was supposed to have begged Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa to forgive his disloyalty with "great humility" during their meeting in 1157. Schmitt angrily dismisses this information as "pure fantasy."⁶⁷

No other Polish historian created a more apocalyptic image of the German menace than did Karol Szajnocha in his very popular (perhaps the most popular historical book of the century) *Jadwiga and Jagiełło*. The book, apart from being an extended biography of Queen Jadwiga and her Lithuanian husband Jogaila, who was crowned King Jagiełło of Poland in 1386, focuses on the conflict between Poland, Lithuania, and the Teutonic Order, which is presented as a mortal threat to both countries. However, in the historian's view, the Teutonic Order is but an element of persistent German expansionism dating back to the dawn of Polish history. Arguing in accordance with the stereotypical image of the Slavs, Szajnocha informs his readers that the Germans had been lured by promises of "open frontiers, the benign nature of the people, fertility of the land, and lack of competition." He accuses the Germans of cruelty, perfidy, greed, pride, filth, and an unceasing and unlimited appetite for Slavic lands. Thus, he considers the "rapturous military invasions" and the "pressure of urban colonization and trade" to be elements of one process, animated by a pan-German dream to conquer or subordinate the entire Slavic realm.⁶⁸

Szujski shows much more respect for the blessings of Western civilization than his colleagues and is therefore a better example of the spirit of animosity against Germany permeating the writings of Polish historians. Although, as mentioned, he considers the adoption of Christianity to be the central turning point in Polish history, he refused to relate it to the German influence on Poland. In contrast, he emphasizes that it was Germany that was responsible for introducing feudalism—an idea despised almost as much by Polish historians as by German ones. How-

ever, what Szujski means by feudalism in the context of German influence seems highly incoherent. Apparently he confuses it with yet another unpopular idea: that of despotism. In his view, the Slavs had been more democratic than the Germans; their rulers had simply been representatives of the people and “administrators of the national property,” whereas the Germanic ones had been “owners of the entire country and the source of all dignity.” Clearly his analysis aims at an explanation of the political order of the early Polish Piast monarchy, which, as mentioned, is quite inexplicable in the context of the Slavs’ alleged democratic individualism. Interestingly, it also appears in parallel to the German image of Rome and its poisonous influence on Germanic institutions. Consequently, Szujski’s ambiguous phobia against Germans may be observed in his comments about German medieval colonization in Poland: he does not complain about the germanization of Polish cities but rejoices over the successes of the “Polish spirit,” like the emancipation of the Polish Catholic clergy from German influence.⁶⁹ In short, in his view cultural importation from the West was a blessing for Poland, particularly insofar as Catholicism is concerned, provided it had nothing to do with Germany. The polonization of imported institutions, and especially the Church, was also emphasized by Stanisław Kaczkowski, author of the first Polish monograph on the history of the Teutonic Order. However, Kaczkowski claims that the Teutonic knights were a just punishment the Poles deserved for having helped the Germans fight the West Slavs and Prussians—whom he considers “brothers,” that is, Slavs.⁷⁰

Finally, Bobrzyński’s and Smoleński’s attitudes toward the Germans differed from those of their fellow historians in that they were coherent and transparent. Like his colleagues, Bobrzyński values all Polish military triumphs in the conflicts against the powerful neighbor and regrets that the Poles assisted the Germans in their conquests of the Slavs living between the Oder and Elbe and passively watched the annihilation of their independence. However, he overtly argues that at that time Germans represented a higher civilization and a better political organization, and he despairs that the Poles did not learn their lesson from them because of their “hatred of the Germans.”⁷¹ He takes a parallel approach, perhaps shocking to his contemporary readers, with regard to German colonization. On one hand, he emphasizes the “most fortunate” impact of the colonization on agriculture and technological innovations, on the organization of labor, and even on the political administration (including that of the Czechs!). On the other hand, like a modern nationalist who witnessed and reconsidered the progress of Bismarck’s *realpolitik*, he describes the process of cultural germanization of the western borderlands and the cities, stressing that Germans were actually enemies of Poland—enemies who should not be demonized but imitated.⁷² Apparently, he would also have glorified Theodoric—who learned from his Roman advisors how to govern Italy—had Theodoric been a Slavic ruler.

Smoleński takes a similar approach to colonization, stressing its benefits for the Polish economy and Polish agriculture, on one hand, and on the other the menace it posed to Polish national identity, which, however, except for Pomerania and Silesia, was neutralized due to the cautious policies of the Polish monarchs. Importantly, he is the only historian under discussion here who openly distances himself from the idea of a natural antagonism between Germans and Poles. He is also the only one to observe calmly that German chronicles constituted a major part of the evidence on early Polish history available to historians of his time and to suggest that the idea of a bitter antagonism between the two peoples owes much to their authors' prejudices, motivated by their "patriotic anger" against Polish rulers who opposed the emperor militarily and politically. In other words, he implicitly suggests that some of the anti-German sentiment of his colleagues may be a result of their frustration with the anti-Polish propaganda they encountered in their sources.⁷³