

Origin Myths

Ex septentrione lux

For a good ending, one needs a good beginning. (It is important to begin well, because of course the main thing is to continue well—this is storytelling.) Such is the implicit but all-powerful rule that a community anxious to edify by telling its story—to itself, to others, to posterity—should follow.

—Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*

History also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin. . . . The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation.

—Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”

Questions of identity are often linked to those of origins. The conceptual bond between the two is such that the celebration of the former frequently involves the embellishment of the latter.

The Nazis developed a coherent origin myth and provided the German people with a distinguished ancestry precisely because they wished to glorify a nation severely humiliated in 1918, first by a military defeat that was rarely acknowledged as such and subsequently by a peace at Versailles that was perceived as a diktat.

This discourse on origins was conceived and transmitted in various ways, including academic and scholarly research. History and anthropology, often perceived as auxiliary sciences, were thrust into the service of the new reigning discipline, racial science (*Rassenkunde*), producing the kind of scholarship under the Third Reich that its leaders demanded. Many scholars did not need much convincing, however, because the Nazis were merely injecting new life into a vulgate widely accepted within the German academy since the nineteenth century: that of the Nordic origins of all civilization.

AUTOCHTHONY AND GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

In his essay “What Is a Nation?,” the French historian Ernest Renan—a man well acquainted with neighboring Germany and its historiography—wrote: “A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I mean genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.”¹ For much of the nineteenth century, Germany saw itself as “late,” a *verspätete Nation*,² backward or behind in comparison with the other Great Powers of Europe. The contrast with France, in particular, had appeared striking to educated Germans since the turn of the century: France was a united nation, brought together first by its great monarchs, then by its newly centralized state, with its codified laws and language established by the general will of the Revolution after 1789. Powerful in its unity, France had achieved a great victory over the so-called Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation; the people represented by the last two words of that august title, meanwhile, still stinging from their defeat in 1806, remained yet to be defined.

But how should German national identity be defined? The answer was certainly not of a political nature: unlike the French, the Germans were divided among a multitude of tiny states, kingdoms, principalities, margraves, free cities, bishoprics, and baronies—more than three hundred in all when the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 had flattered their rulers’ desires for power and autonomy by generously granting them territorial sovereignty (*Landeshoheit*) in exchange for maintaining the scarcely tenable fiction that was the Holy Roman Empire.

Was German identity cultural? Yes and no. Certainly, German humanists had taken pride in their strong linguistic identity since the Renaissance, when Martin Luther erected the first monument to the German tongue by translating Jerome’s Bible into the vulgate in 1522. But the German language could not boast of uniformity or a regulatory

authority equivalent to that of the Académie française. It remained a Babel of dialects, many of which continue to possess a baffling amount of vigor even today (at least to a French observer raised with the type of linguistic standards imposed by the Académie of Condorcet and Jules Ferry). Furthermore, after the Reformation the Germans were divided yet again, this time along religious lines, between the largely Protestant north and a happily Catholic Rhenish and Alpine south. This partition ran along a boundary given the picturesque nickname *der Weisswurstäquator*, or “the white-sausage line”—north and south being equally split by their gastronomic preferences.³

Faced with a dearth of political, linguistic, or religious alternatives, nineteenth-century Germans turned to anthropology. Surely they could not fail to find the elusive key to German identity by studying the race of a people that had lived on Germanic soil since the dawn of time?⁴

Evidence of this race’s existence dated back at least two millennia. Since the Renaissance, German scholars could look to no less of an authority than Tacitus, who had briefly described the barbarians that the Romans had encountered and fought north of the Danube and east of the Rhine. In *De origine et situ germanorum*, the official historian of the Flavian dynasty conferred a patina of classical prestige on a people without their own written history. French subjects and citizens had much earlier chosen to appropriate the writings of Caesar, who had preserved and maintained for them the pious memory of their Gauls.⁵ But the Germans could boast of their Germania: for a nation not yet fully born, such acknowledgment from the pen of a great Roman author was like a birth certificate, proof of its authenticity and worthiness of veneration, as well as of its continuity throughout history to the present day.

Germany, then, was the land populated by the Germans. But where did these early Germans themselves come from? Tacitus had set forth only a hasty genealogy of the Germanic peoples. With an evident lack of imagination, and not knowing to whom they belonged, he had simply repeated an idea borrowed from the Greeks—an idea destined for a long and healthy life. He planted the roots of their family tree firmly into the soil where the Romans had found them:

The *Germani* themselves are indigenous, I believe, and have in no way been mixed by the arrivals and alliances of other peoples.⁶

These two Latin words, *Germanos indigenas*, would form the foundation of the myth of Germanic autochthony. In Latin, the adjective *indigena*, *-ae* is derived from *unde*, the relative pronoun or interrogative

that designates origin, in this instance transposed into the correlative prefix *inde-*. The *indigena* is thus “one who comes from here,” “here” being the place in question. The Latin term used by Tacitus thus corresponds precisely with the meaning expressed by the Greek roots of the word *autochthony*: the Germans were born of themselves (*auto-*), without the addition, assistance, or agglomeration of outside peoples, in their own native land (*-chthony*). In this regard, they saw themselves much like the Athenians, whose conviction in their own superiority over other Hellenes was based on the belief that they were born there—unlike the Spartans, for instance, who were the product of Dorian immigration.⁷

This autochthony, the spontaneous generation of a people from their own soil, a veritable parthenogenesis from a fertile land engorged with blood, was joined by a second topos: that of racial purity. After their immaculate conception, the Germanic peoples had never miscegenated with other races:

For myself, I agree with the views of those who think that the inhabitants of Germania have not been tainted by any intermarriage with other tribes, but have existed as a distinct and pure people, resembling only themselves.⁸

Having bequeathed the Germans their ancient lineage, Tacitus also flattered them with his description of their impressive physical and moral stature. His ethnography established the anthropomorphic caricature that defined the Teutonic stereotype and has dogged the German people ever since. Their perfect physiques were endowed with equally laudable moral traits. The Teutonic ethnotype was thus admirable in both body and spirit. It is not hard to see how Tacitus earned his lasting pride of place in the development of German national identity.

ARYAN MIGRATIONS: THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A MYTH

In the centuries that followed its rediscovery between 1450 and 1500, Tacitus’s *Germania* and the ideas it contained were a source of continual speculation about the purity, content, and universality of the German character.

In the meantime, however, the myth of German autochthony was shaken by the emergence of a competing discourse on origins that captured the imagination of Western intellectuals during the Enlightenment: the idea that the peoples of western Europe had come from India.

The origin myths adopted by the newly forming European nations all drew upon a common source: the story of Genesis, set down in scripture as an incontestable truth handed down from God. Each of these myths strove to synthesize biblical revelation with the history of antiquity and classical mythology in a single, unified fresco of all human history since Adam.

The Genesis myth began to pose a problem in the eighteenth century, however, for its roots were at once both Jewish and Christian; it thus stood in direct conflict with the antireligious, anticlerical sentiments of many enlightened minds of the time. Any truly free thinker could never admit to viewing scripture as the unsurpassed fount of all truth. He (or occasionally she) was far more eager to appeal to the sciences of history, geography, or linguistics when discussing the origins of humanity.

Furthermore, the Jewishness of the Adam story ran counter to the prevailing anti-Semitism of the era. The heritage of Christianity was firmly anchored in the Western mentality, and anti-Judaism—an ambivalent mixture of mistrust and disdain, at times shading toward outright hatred—was an almost universal sentiment, one shared even by Abbé Grégoire, who otherwise defended the cause of Jewish emancipation. The Adamic myth implied a shared kinship with the Jews, a taint of Semitic parentage that many simply could not countenance.

The eighteenth century thus witnessed a search for a suitable alternative. The cradle of humanity would no longer be found in Adam or the Palestine of the prophets but rather in India—a hypothesis supported most notably by the famously anticlerical and fundamentally anti-Semitic Voltaire. This was the idea that gave birth to the Aryan myth, later studied in such great depth by the great Russian-French historian Léon Poliakov.⁹

Interest in India was growing at the time as a result of British exploration and conquest. Travel narratives from various explorers told of the wonders of Indian culture. A general climate of Anglophilia helped these ideas spread throughout Europe's educated classes. It was also around this time that geographers began to speculate that the interior of the Indian subcontinent was unlike any other land on earth. The presence of seashells on virtually every global landmass corroborated the myth of the Great Flood, which man could not have survived except on the highest reaches of the planet—the towering peaks of the Himalayas.

The idea that humankind came from India also pleased the most fervent of Christian believers. After all, the Garden of Eden was supposedly located somewhere to the east, and the wonders of India strongly resembled that earthly paradise so desperately sought after since the

Middle Ages. What's more, the Mountains of Ararat, where Noah and his Ark came to rest, could very well have been located among the Himalayas.

The Out-of-India theory (also known as the Indian *Urheimat* theory) was also apparently reaffirmed by the new study of comparative linguistics. In 1788, a British judge posted to Bengal named William Jones decided to relieve his boredom by delivering a series of lectures in which he claimed to have found a connection between Sanskrit—the oldest language in the world—and the ancient and modern tongues of Europe: Latin, Greek, German, English, and French. Citing a number of homologous grammatical structures and lexical relations, he concluded that Sanskrit was the original mother tongue of all modern European languages, from which each contemporary vernacular had emerged.

A second conclusion followed from the first: the only way this language could have reached Europe was if the people of India had migrated west to occupy and populate Europe itself. The modern Western man was a direct descendant of these Indian invaders, who in the nineteenth century would subsequently be called Indo-Europeans: a superior tribe of white peoples, the creators of all culture, who had come down from the summits of their homeland one fine day to wander and subjugate the world and had thus created all of civilization.

Indo-European studies were created and developed as the science of ancestry. In 1808, the German writer, historian, and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel published his essay “On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians,”¹⁰ thus becoming the first Indo-Europeanist. This was the same Schlegel who, in another of his essays, published in 1819, introduced the word *Arier* into German in order to describe these migrant conquerors who had given birth to the languages, peoples, and cultures of modern Europe. Schlegel coined the term after the Sanskrit *Arya*, for “noble,” which he believed also nodded toward the root of the German word *Ehre*, or “honor.”

More than the French or the British, the Germans happily adopted this origin myth and took pride in their Aryan genealogy; so much so, in fact, that in addition to the word *Aryan*, they coined the term *Indogermanisch* (Indo-Germanic),¹¹ to describe not just these glorious ancestors but also their contemporary descendants, who could thus claim that they had preserved traces of their forebears' timeless purity on sacred German soil. Direct linguistic affiliation only further bolstered their claims of racial kinship. In Germany, then, Indomania was transformed into Germanomania. The Indians had sown the fertile German

soil and brought into the world a people who were at once German, Indo-Germanic, and Aryan.

All the enlightened minds of the time accepted this new origin myth. Hegel gave it a scholarly imprimatur and raised it to the level of metaphysics in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*,¹² tracing the development of the world spirit (*Weltgeist*), which, having dawned in the East, moved to the West to find its fullest expression in the German concept of liberty. Jacob Grimm, in the preface to his 1848 *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache* (History of the German language),¹³ echoed similar ideas.

It should be noted that Germany at the dawn of the nineteenth century was in the midst of an identity crisis whose roots went much deeper than the Napoleonic invasion and occupation. In this context, the Aryan myth conferred on Germany a sense of unity and invincibility with respect to all other nations; the Germans believed theirs was the chosen land of Europe's Aryan invaders.

But if the Germans were initially content to view India as their Aryan *Urheimat*, or “ancestral home,” they gradually moved this cradle of human civilization farther to the west, choosing instead to find it in modern-day Germany and Scandinavia.

The myth of the Nordic origins of all civilization would become the ideological foundation of the nationalist and racist movements that sprouted up throughout Germany and Austria in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this view, the Nordics or Indo-Germanics were the world's sole creative people; all of Western culture had come from this prolific warrior race from the North, which had given birth to the world's great civilizations.

The propaganda literature of these various racist groups,¹⁴ which the young Hitler read voraciously during his indolent, itinerant years in Vienna,¹⁵ formed the bridge that introduced the nineteenth-century Aryan myth to the National Socialist movement. Hitler's reading of the Ariosophists Guido von List and Jörg von Liebenfels¹⁶ directly inspired the composition of his ominous ideological speech “Why Are We Anti-Semites?”¹⁷ delivered in Munich on 13 August 1920. In his address, Hitler recounted the origins of the two primary racial types—Aryans and Jews—and made the myth of Nordic origins the central racial-genetic platform of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or NSDAP:

In the northernmost part of the world, in those unending icy wastes, . . . perpetual hardship and terrible privation worked as a means of racial selection. Here, what was weak and sickly did not survive, . . . leaving a race of

giants with great strength and vigor. . . . The race we now call Aryan was in fact the creator of those great later civilizations whose history we still find traces of today. We know that Egypt was brought to its cultural heights by Aryan immigrants, as were Persia and Greece; these immigrants were blond, blue-eyed Aryans, and we know that, apart from these states, there have never been any other civilized countries on earth.¹⁸

THE INDO-GERMANIC ORACLE: HANS GÜNTHER AND NORDICISM

The idea that the Indo-Europeans were originally a Nordic people was vigorously promoted and staunchly defended in the German academy as well as the broader public sphere by the official racial anthropologist of the Nazi Party, Hans Friedrich Karl Günther (1891–1968), a pedantic scholar and prolific evangelizer of the Nordacist racial gospel.

Originally from Freiburg, where he studied for a doctorate in biology and anthropology, Günther was also a fervent nationalist and combatant in the trenches during the First World War before becoming one of those radicals, desperadoes, and “outlaws”¹⁹ who fought in the *Freikorps* until 1921.

A *Privatdozent* (untenured professor) in Sweden and Norway during the 1920s, he nevertheless made a name for himself in Germany through a never-ending stream of publications, which helped make him the father of German racial science in the eyes of the educated public; his *Rassenkunde des Deutschen Volkes*²⁰ sold some 270,000 copies from its first printing in 1922 until its final edition in 1943. The success of this and other titles earned him, in party circles, the rather clever nickname of *Rassengünther*: “Günther the Racialist.”

Although he was not formally a party member until 1932, Günther maintained close ties with the Nazis and published his books with the Munich house of Julius Friedrich Lehmann (1864–1935), who founded J.F. Lehmanns Verlag in 1890 and soon turned it into a clearinghouse for racist and Pan-Germanist literature.²¹ Lehmann was a Nazi of the first hour. He joined the party in 1920 after spending time in the *Freikorps*, and in addition to Günther he edited Eugen Fischer, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Richard Walther Darré, Ferdinand Ludwig Clauss, and several other well-known names in contemporary racialist circles.

Günther’s racism contained a *mélange* of ideas from the French writers Arthur de Gobineau and Georges Vacher de Lapouge, as well as the British author Houston Stewart Chamberlain, all substantiated by the scholarship of contemporary German prehistorians. Like Gobineau, he

believed that the “pure” races had forever disappeared, but he also argued that the implementation of a state policy on race—an active and vigorous “selectionism,” in the formulation of Vacher de Lapouge—could protect the Nordic element in Germany and perhaps even help return the German people closer to the original Aryan type.

Günther had never managed to win a permanent position in the German academy prior to 1930. That year, however, Thuringia elected the first National Socialist majority to govern a German state, and the Nazi interior minister Wilhelm Frick immediately asked the University of Jena to create a chair in racial science specifically for him. Günther gave his first lecture on 15 November 1930, in the presence of the party’s most distinguished leaders: in addition to Göring, Sauckel, Darré, and Frick, Adolf Hitler himself came to listen to the master.

The Nazis’ rise to power reinforced his political connections and scholarly credentials. He was named a professor at the University of Berlin in 1935, then Freiburg in 1939, and helped inspire the writing of the Nuremberg Laws through his activities with the Reich Interior Ministry’s Sachverständigenbeirat für Bevölkerungs- und Rassenpolitik (Expert committee on questions of population and racial policy), to which he was appointed in 1933. Günther accumulated a number of official accolades: in 1935, he received the Staatspreis der NSDAP für Wissenschaft (Nazi state prize for scientific research), and Hitler himself awarded him the Goethe-Medaille für Kunst und Wissenschaft (Goethe medal for art and science) as well as the Goldenes Parteiabzeichen (Golden party badge) in 1941, a rare honor for services rendered in the name of National Socialism.

Günther made his name synonymous with the Nordic theory of the origins of civilization, a theory he championed in his more general works on German and European racial science but also in two specialized monographs dedicated to Greco-Roman antiquity and the racial history of India.

That all culture came from the North was an indisputable fact, as were all signs of the Nordic race and its greatness. Günther vehemently disagreed with supporters of the Out-of-India theory—he considered the Indians “Asiatic”—and he did not back down from polemical exchanges with his opponents, unleashing a salvo of counterarguments: Whoever supported this Asiatic hypothesis, he maintained, would have to show proof of the immigration of Indo-Germanic elites sometime between the third and fourth millennia BC. Yet, he claimed, “research on prehistoric times has not come up with any evidence to support a migration of this sort.”²²

Furthermore, scholars of the prehistoric period had already abandoned the notion of a migration out of Asia, which was a fundamentally biblical idea: “It is thus not surprising that prehistoric research . . . has given up the antiquated hypothesis of the Asiatic migration of the Indo-Germans, a hypothesis that originated with the Old Testament.”²³ The mere mention of the Old Testament, a text at once Jewish and Christian, was enough to dismiss the concept of such a migration as an outrage against the Nordic race and a blight upon its immaculate origins: how could one believe that the pinnacle of humanity came from the East,²⁴ that the Germans, of all peoples, could have come from Asia? In his book, Günther called out his detractors by name, inadvertently introducing his readers to the complexity of these debates and unintentionally acknowledging that his ideas were neither as obvious nor as universally accepted as he claimed.

In his *Kleine Rassenkunde des Deutschen Volkes* (Brief racial ethnology of the German people), a cynical effort to reach a popular audience, Günther was even more assertive, offering a facile synthesis of ideas and sparing the reader the bothersome details of complex debates, subtle arguments, or sophisticated hypotheses. Its aim was more obviously pedagogical, its tone resolute and decisive: “One must look for the native lands of the Nordic race in those regions of Paleolithic Europe that had not been subsumed by glaciers.”²⁵

Günther continued beating the drum of Nordicism, for it was not perceived to be self-evident in universities or scholarly circles, as his colleague and accomplice Carl Schuchhardt noted in an article on the “Indo-Germanization of Greece”: while “the idea of an Indo-Germanic homeland in Central Asia, as supported a century ago by comparative linguistics in a rush of juvenile impetuosity, no longer maintains any scientific validity,” intellectual laziness and the weight of tradition had artificially kept it alive, such that “even educated people are surprised to hear that our German ancestors and their relations, the Celts, the Italic peoples, the Greeks . . . had nothing to do with Asia but rather came from northern and central Europe, and from there expanded to the south and east, until finally reaching India.”²⁶

Ultimately, Günther triumphed by virtue of what might politely be described as the repetitive and categorically assertive quality of his overflowing body of work.

But to establish the validity of his own ideas, he needed to deliver a mortal blow to the heart of the Asiatic migration theory, destroying it once and for all. So Günther wrote a book on the Nordic origins of the

Indo-Germanic peoples of Asia. In *Die nordische Rasse bei den Indogermanen Asiens: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Urheimat und Rassenherkunft der Indogermanen* (The Nordic race and the Indo-Germans in Asia: A contribution on the question of the homeland and racial origins of the Indo-Germanic peoples),²⁷ published in 1934, he sifted through the genealogy of the Iranian, Indian, Persian, and Afghan civilizations: if these peoples, who represented the elite of the East in antiquity, could be shown to have originally migrated from the North, then the old chimera *ex oriente lux*, “the light from the East,” would finally be discredited. Günther eliminated any pretense of the hypothetical or conjectural from his work, and after 1933 his word was taken as gospel thanks to the apparatus of intellectual censorship developed by the Nazi party-state.

Nordicist theory was also endorsed by the three musketeers of Nazi racial medicine, Eugen Fischer, Erwin Baur, and Fritz Lenz,²⁸ the authors of a multivolume reference on eugenics and scientific racism. Though nominally dedicated to the modern period, the “Baur-Fischer-Lenz,” as it was known, frequently used Persia, India, or the Greeks and Romans as examples of Nordic destiny.²⁹ In his volume on eugenics, for instance, Lenz repeatedly referred to Greek and Roman history as Indo-Germanic precedents useful to understand for their contemporary implications.³⁰

In addition to biology and eugenics, anthropology and archaeology also adopted Nordicist ideas. The journal of the Ahnenerbe, the Nazis’ “ancestral heritage” organization under the aegis of the SS, multiplied its efforts to prove its worth in academic circles. Its director, Walther Wüst, contributed a piece on “India and Germany,”³¹ while the prolific archaeologist Franz Altheim contributed a series of articles on “Germans and Iranians,”³² as well as more tightly focused essays on the *Elchrune* (the so-called life rune), found throughout the lands occupied by Indo-Germanic peoples, much like the figure of the stag, an important animal in bestiaries from the same regions.³³ The widespread distribution of these artistic forms and symbols, which appeared to share the same cultural significance,³⁴ was taken as a sign of a uniform pattern of occupation and thus of the inhabitants’ shared racial origins. A common race produced a common spirit and a common culture; in this strict deterministic logic, there was a clear line of continuity between the corporal and the spiritual, biology and culture.

Blood kinship, a common racial inheritance, was thus equivalent to a shared cultural heritage. The same blood had created the same symbols, just as the Indo-Germans spoke similar languages—all derived from a common Nordic tongue—and shared a common symbolic

universe, as the swastika demonstrated. These common symbols were a sign, much like their use of fire;³⁵ Germanic rites to mark the solstice had called for a bonfire, akin to the flame carefully tended and transported by the Greeks or the sacred flame jealously guarded by the Vestal Virgins of Rome. In essence, the racial scientist thought, worked, and acted like an anthropologist who had forgotten the meaning of culture and attributed everything to nature.

THE NORDICISM OF THE NSDAP

As the historian Cornelia Essner has shown, in her work with the anthropologist Édouard Conte, the Nordicism of Hans Günther became the official doctrine of the Nazi Party and thus the country between 1933 and 1934.³⁶ By vigorously promoting his Nordacist ideas, Günther also rallied the most radical troops of the *Völkisch* movement. In turn, his theories, cobbled together from the xenophobic and nationalist literature of the late nineteenth century, fueled the party's most virulent racists, who largely gravitated toward the SS. Himmler, Richard Darré, and Alfred Rosenberg all obsequiously adopted Nordacist ideas, which promised to lend racial and historical legitimacy to future policies of conquest and annexation—since, after all, the idea of an all-conquering Nordic race fit perfectly with their concept of a once and future Greater Indo-Germanic Reich. Significantly, the strongest opposition to Nordicism came from within the ranks of the SA, the left wing of the party, with its “red-brown” variant of Nazism that fit uneasily with the elitist, exclusionary idea of a Nordic aristocracy threatened by the other racial strains within the German population, which Günther, Darré, and the SS had denounced as dangerous vectors of “de-Nordification” (*Entnordung*). The elimination of the SA leadership during the Night of the Long Knives on 30 June 1934, and the subsequent political discrediting of this popular—and populist—gang of Nazi thugs, tipped the scales in favor of the SS and their racial mentor.

By this time, the concept of the Nordic origins of Indo-European civilization was no longer seen as a theory but was elevated to the level of state dogma, a dogma that Günther gave a lyrical twist in one of his most popular books. In *Rassenkunde des Deutschen Volkes* (Racial ethnology of the German people), Günther—citing Jordanes, a medieval historian famous for his work on the Goths—noted that “the writers of antiquity called the North of Europe the womb of nations [*vagina nationum*].”³⁷

The ideological indoctrination given to the SS duly reflected Günther's dogma. The soldiers of the Ordnungspolizei, for instance, were taught that "the homeland of the Nordic race can be found in the western, northwestern, and central Europe of the Ice Age. The geographic center of the Nordic race encompasses the territories of modern-day Thuringia, the North and Baltic Seas, Jutland, and Scandinavia."³⁸ For its part, the SS weekly newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* declared in its inaugural issue that the cradle of the Nordic peoples could be found near the North Pole.³⁹

Promoted by racial scientists and anthropologists, the Nordacist vulgate was also accepted unreservedly by historians of classical antiquity, who were all too happy to promote the legitimacy of their field of study by adopting "modern" racial theories. The classics thus quietly became a branch of Nordic studies.⁴⁰

Official Nazi policy disseminated Nordic theory as well. We have already seen how Hitler adopted Nordicism as party doctrine as early as 1920.⁴¹ In the following decade, these ideas were tirelessly promoted by the man destined to become one of the party's chief ideologues, Alfred Rosenberg, after 1934 the *Beauftragter des Führers für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP* (führer's commissioner for the supervision of the intellectual and ideological education of the NSDAP).

This new incarnation of the Aryan myth made it much easier to claim Greco-Roman antiquity and the other prestigious civilizations of the ancient world as integral parts of the history of the Nordic-Germanic race. In previous versions of the myth, Greece and Rome remained on the periphery, as if they were extraneous to the core history of the race: Greeks, Romans, and Germans were merely related. Though they may have been members of the same family, they did not hesitate to fight and even to annihilate one another—as their history, particularly the Peloponnesian Wars and the sack of Rome, amply demonstrated.

But by making modern-day Germany the *Urheimat* of the Nordic-Germanic race, the Nazis' version of the Aryan myth resolved these historical contradictions by fundamentally rearranging its genealogy, making their relationship no longer one of mere kinship but rather one of direct parentage. The trunk of the family tree was now Nordic-Germanic, its various branches Greek, Roman, Indian, or Persian.

Now that the racial rootstock had been planted firmly in German soil, it was easier to see how the branches had grown and spread from their ancestral home. They had emigrated from Germany toward the

more temperate climes of the south, particularly Greece, India, and the Italian peninsula, where they had given birth to the most prestigious and powerful of all world cultures and civilizations.

The paternity of Greek culture and the Roman Empire could thus be traced straight back to the Nordic-Germanic race: the Parthenon and the Acropolis, the Apollo Belvedere and the Roman Pantheon were now the expression and demonstration of Nordic racial genius.

THE ARYAN: “PROMETHEUS OF MANKIND”

That all civilization came from the North was a point repeatedly hammered home by Hitler himself. In *Mein Kampf*, the führer had outlined a cultural hierarchy of peoples in which he defined the Aryans as the world’s only “creative” race, a *Kulturbegründer* locked in mortal combat with its eternal archenemy, the Jews, parasitic destroyers of Aryan civilization:

If we were to divide mankind into three groups, the founders of culture, the bearers of culture, the destroyers of culture, only the Aryan could be considered as the representative of the first group. From him originate the foundations and walls of all human creation, and only the outward form and color are determined by the changing traits of character of the various peoples. He provides the mightiest building stones and plans for all human progress and only the execution corresponds to the nature of the varying men and races.⁴²

In this same passage, Hitler also described the Aryan as a figure from Greek myth, “the Prometheus of mankind from whose bright forehead the divine spark of genius has sprung at all times.”⁴³ Hitler thus couched his own thoughts in Greek allegory: just as Prometheus brought fire and light to all of humanity, so the Greeks—those Nordic giants—laid the foundations for all of Western civilization.

Prometheus was also a recurring theme in Nazi sculpture. Beginning in 1937, visitors to the ring of honor in the new Reich Chancellery designed by Albert Speer were welcomed by two nude warriors, sculpted by Arno Breker, which flanked both sides of the primary entrance. One nude, armed with a sword, represented the Wehrmacht; the other, holding aloft a fiery torch, represented the Nazi Party. The allusion to Prometheus was not explicitly stated in the statue’s name (*Die Partei*), but the reference to classical mythology and its echo in *Mein Kampf* were obvious from the presence of the flame. Breker later revisited the legend of Prometheus for a second giant statue unveiled in 1938. The party, meanwhile, the bearer of fire and light, would lead the German people

out of a period of historical darkness and into a radiant new day, dignified and strong, following the motto *Deutschland erwache!* (Germany, awake!), flown proudly on party standards.⁴⁴

A stamp issued in 1938 by the Reich post office, the Reichspost, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the seizure of power included a nod to both Prometheus and the Olympian ideal, with the profile of an athlete holding the torch before the Brandenburg Gate, the German equivalent of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, celebrating military power and victory. Such symbols were not reserved for just government offices under the regime; Nazi iconography decorated private spaces as well: themes of awakening and the turning of night into day were also the subject of Josef Wackerle's *Durch Nacht zum Licht* (1939) in Jena—a Promethean man with a flame lighting the way for a prostrate woman on her knees.

Prometheus's central place in the Nazi political and artistic vocabulary was perhaps due to the influence of Goethe. In his poem "Prometheus" (1776), a monument of Weimar classicism familiar to all German schoolchildren, Goethe celebrated the courage of a man who rebelled against the gods to become the master of his own destiny. Party schools were infused with this Promethean spirit, Nazi shorthand for the enlightenment and willpower of a man determined to create his own history. The National Socialist elite, for instance, were trained in select academies, the Ordensburgen, where they were taught to see themselves as Prometheus on the rock—the party's metaphor for its special role in molding the destiny of the German people. The Sonnenwendplatz (Solstice plaza) at the Ordensburg Vogelsang in North Rhine–Westphalia contained a Prometheus by the sculptor Willy Meller; the adjoining wall bore an inscription addressed to the cadets: "You are the torchbearers of the nation—you carry the light of the spirit forward into battle for Adolf Hitler."⁴⁵

CONFUCIUS WITH BLUE EYES AND BLOND HAIR, OR
NOTHING GREAT IN THE WORLD HAS EVER BEEN
ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT ARYANS

We might define a cardinal principle of the Nazi rewriting of history by parodying Hegel: "Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without Aryans."⁴⁶ This was, of course, a bit of circular logic; historical narration requires that such assertions be illustrated with evidence. While Germany's ancient history might occasionally leave those lovers of high culture weaned on the classical treasures of the Orient and the Mediterranean on display in Berlin's Museeninsel with a certain

skepticism about their own past, their patriotic sentiments were nevertheless buoyed by the belief that, as the Indo-Germanic or Aryanist vulgate had it, all of the world's great civilizations were the expression of Nordic racial genius. If the Germanic North had fallen behind culturally over the course of millennia, the fault, as Hitler argued, could be attributed to the harsh climate—less favorable to the flowering of Nordic creativity—or to any one of a number of other historical factors that his specious reasoning could come up with.

Nordic theory allowed the Indo-Germanic race to claim all the prestige, glory, and grandeur associated with thousands of years of Mediterranean and Eastern cultural development for itself. Although this book concerns itself primarily with the Greeks and Romans—who were the focus of artistic, historical, and ideological attention at the time—it is nevertheless interesting and somewhat amusing to examine the fate reserved for ancient Egypt and, more rarely, China in the Nazi historical world view.⁴⁷

Wherever there was a glorious ancient civilization to be found, Nordic elites came, saw, and conquered, leaving behind worlds of wealth and refinement, inimitable works of art, powerful armies and states, Great Walls and pyramids. Over time, these imaginative, all-conquering elites had been subsumed by the native masses, their racial purity corroded by qualitatively inferior but numerically superior peoples, which explained why contemporary Egyptians now had dark skin or why the Chinese had yellow skin and slanted eyes. Nevertheless, it remained impossible to comprehend the cultural richness and historical grandeur of these civilizations without the divine intervention of the Nordic creative spark. For Hitler, there was no doubt that the Egyptians had been Aryan before an untimely wave of racial miscegenation with Asiatic or Semitic elements had literally cast a shadow over their white skin. In his table talks, Hitler waxed poetic about the Egyptian body—which was comparable to that of the Greeks: “If we consider the ancient Greeks (who were Germanics), we find in them a beauty much superior to the beauty such as is widespread today. . . . If one plunges further into the past, one comes again with the Egyptians upon human beings of the quality of the Greeks.”⁴⁸

The Egyptians had thus initially been tall and dolichocephalic (long skulled), with blond hair and blue eyes, as had the Chinese. In a small pamphlet on comparative racial science, Richard Walther Darré noted a similar Indo-Germanic kinship between Lycurgus's Spartans and the Confucian Chinese: “The Chinese of the upper classes—the members of the elite, that is, like Confucius— . . . were not far removed from the

type of man of the Nordic race. . . . Everything points to the fact that the Chinese ruling class, at least, were blond haired and blue eyed, and thus of Aryan or Indo-Germanic descent.”⁴⁹

As if the physiological argument he put forward were not enough to satisfy the skeptical reader, Darré added further cultural evidence: the Chinese were, like all self-respecting Aryans, a patriarchal society, and placed great emphasis on music in the education of their offspring, just like the Spartans.⁵⁰ *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

HEGEL TURNED SIDEWAYS, OR THE GREAT MIGRATION FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

Contrary to the ancient Latin adage *ex oriente lux*—“the light from the East”—the Nazis proclaimed a rather different concept of the history of civilization: *ex septentrione lux*. It was from the North, the Septentrion, and not the East, that enlightenment came into being.

A believer in the original Aryan myth—the Out-of-India hypothesis—and a man well acquainted with the ancient and medieval notion of *translatio studii et imperii*, Hegel had defined the migration of the *Weltgeist* (world spirit) as a movement from East to West, a mirror image of the sun’s daily journey across the skies. The world spirit, then, followed the sun, flooded man with light, and progressed from the Orient to the Occident. Invoking “the great day of the spirit”⁵¹ in a fever of teleological self-congratulation, Hegel wrote: “World history moves from East to West, where Europe is the absolute end of history and Asia the beginning,”⁵² the *terminus ad quem* being axiomatically and ontologically superior to the *terminus a quo*.

For the Nazis, rewriting the Aryan myth meant nothing less than drafting an alternative philosophy of history, one that turned Hegel sideways. Alfred Rosenberg took it upon himself to defend the North’s honor, formulating a systematic counterattack against the classic Hegelian notion of the spirit in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*: “The march of world history has radiated from the north over the entire planet, determining in vast successive waves the spiritual face of the world—influencing it even in those cases where it was to be halted,”⁵³ as in Persia, Egypt, Iran, and India, or even China.

Rosenberg made an even more explicit attack on Hegel and the Aryan myth in a 1935 speech at Lübeck:

The old doctrine of light from the East, together with the idea that the peoples of Europe emigrated from Asia, that is, that the physical and spiritual

fatherland of Europe lay in Asia, today has been proved completely false. The march of history did not, as a superficial and sectarian view of history would have us believe, follow a path from East to West. Rather, the creative spirit of the millennia that concern us radiated ceaselessly from the racial might of the North, which emigrated south and southeast.⁵⁴

Ex septentrione lux: the Aryan or Nordic man had shone his light across the world and created all high culture. All the great civilizations of history were the fruit of his labor—including, of course, the glorious and immortal achievements of Greece and Rome: “The migrations of the Nordic peoples, which once gave birth to the civilizations of India, Iran, Greece, and Rome, are well known today, and wherever we look, the emergence of cultures and states was not the product of fortunate circumstance or magical revelation but the product of a special race and its development, but also of its struggle with other races and racial types.”⁵⁵

It was from towns precisely like Lübeck, indeed from across all of northern Germany, that “these never-ending waves of Indo-Germanic people set forth to create the civilizations of antiquity.”⁵⁶

The womb of civilizations was no longer India but Germany. Once the cradle of Aryan peoples, India found itself reduced to the status of a welcome mat for an influx of Nordic immigrants, a territorial repository on the same level as Italy or Greece, the jewels of the South set in the crown of their common mother to the north.

In another speech a few months later, Rosenberg reiterated the regime’s new historical orthodoxy before a group of scholars of the pre-historic era specializing in the Germanic lands: “Asia once passed for the cradle of mankind, the wellspring of all the great civilizations. Now new research has shown that the nineteenth-century notion of the spiritual relationship between the Indo-Germanic peoples was not one of influence moving from southeast to north but the reverse. Much earlier, Germanic peoples with Nordic roots migrated from central and northern Europe in countless waves, reaching as far as Central Asia, in Iran and India.”⁵⁷

Cartography visually captured the shift in this discourse on racial origins, all too clearly depicting the inversion of these two concepts of history and the replacement of one historical paradigm with another. In a 1937 pedagogical manual for the training of history instructors in secondary schools,⁵⁸ for example, two maps juxtaposed a representation of the “old concept of history”—that is, the Out-of-India hypothesis and Hegelian philosophy—to the Indo-European theory of the late nineteenth century. The first map highlighted Indo-European migra-

tions with four arrows: from India, from the Golden Triangle of Mesopotamia, from Palestine, and from Egypt.

The second map proudly presented “the new concept of history, the result of research on prehistoric events.” Endowed with the imprimatur of objective truth, it depicted the Indo-Germanic race as coming from a single Nordic home, along with its dispersal patterns and waves of expansion around the globe.

A MYTH TOO FAR: ATLANTIS AND THE ATLANTEAN HYPOTHESIS

In the midst of all this discussion of origins, an old white whale of the Western imaginary also returned to the surface: Atlantis.

The history of that fertile and powerful island, the fatherland of an all-conquering and civilizing race of peoples, had been conjured up by Plato in two of his dialogues, *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Ever since, the existence and location of Atlantis were the subjects of ceaseless speculation, the absence of evidence leaving plenty of room for the mythopoetic imagination.⁵⁹

In certain German racist or Aryanist circles, such as the Thule Gesellschaft (Thule society),⁶⁰ Atlantis was sometimes equated with the “Ultima Thule” identified by the Greek geographer Pytheas of Marseilles.

It was in this vein that the Aryanist Karl Georg Zschaetzsch published his 1922 book *Atlantis: Die Urheimat der Arier* (Atlantis: Homeland of the Aryans),⁶¹ in which he defended the idea that the first Indo-Germanic migration had originated on the vanished island.

His thesis caught the attention of Alfred Rosenberg, who could not refrain from mentioning the Atlantean hypothesis in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, apparently driven by his penchant for the frenzied compilation of half-baked ideas, as well as his taste for any and all ravings on the mythical and occult. But he did not accept the idea of Atlantis as the Aryans’ ancestral home in bold, unequivocal terms. While “it seem[ed] far from impossible” that such an island had existed and given birth to a race of “seafarers and warriors,” the essential point behind the hypothesis remained that of civilization’s Nordic origins: “But even if this Atlantis hypothesis should prove untenable, a prehistoric Nordic cultural center must still be assumed.”⁶² This lukewarm reception of the idea did not prevent Rosenberg from describing hypothetical Atlantean migrations in the pages that followed before dropping the subject, never to

mention it again, either in the rest of the book or in his many public speeches.

In the end, the Atlantean hypothesis was too weak to hold up as a genealogical myth, and it should be noted that it never really caught on: setting aside the work of Zschaetzsch and a few pages of Rosenberg, the list of published German work on the subject is rather anemic. Between 1933 and 1945, only one book specifically addressed the idea, and that was by an archaeologist, Albert Herrmann, who in 1934 published *Unsere Ahnen und Atlantis: Nordische Seeherrschaft von Skandinavien bis Nordafrika* (Our ancestors and Atlantis: Nordic naval hegemony from Scandinavia to North Africa).⁶³ A professor at the University of Berlin, Herrmann maintained a regular correspondence with Heinrich Himmler. Fond of esoterica and mythology and little inclined to let science detract from a good story, the *Reichsführer-SS*—a great fan of the work of Jules Verne, among others—looked favorably upon such speculation regarding Atlantis.⁶⁴ For Himmler, the Platonic myth, as filtered through the eyes of some imaginative racists, was to be taken as the literal truth: the original homeland of the Nordic race could very well have been an island in the farthest reaches of the North, an enigmatic enclave that the lover of mysteries and absolutes would later ask his scholars in the Ahnenerbe to go and discover.⁶⁵ The exact site was alleged to reside in the waters somewhere between the English Channel and the Heligoland Bight, the latter the location preferred by Himmler himself.⁶⁶

None of this speculation found its way into more serious Nordicist literature: it lacked scholarly rigor in the eyes of those for whom scientific genealogy was their profession, who largely agreed that the original Nordic homeland lay somewhere between Scandinavia and northern Germany. The Atlantean hypothesis was too flimsy, too bloated with legend and mystery, and too shot through with uncertainty to support the scholarly pretensions of a young Nordicist science. Atlantis produced only a few internal debates between Himmler and the Ahnenerbe but no publications, research, or formal expeditions; Himmler's demands for deep-sea explorations around Heligoland never came to fruition, because of the Reich's wartime defeat.⁶⁷ *Das Schwarze Korps* made little mention of Atlantis save for a review of an important work by Wilhelm Sieglin, which we will return to later.⁶⁸

Perceived as purely speculative and barren of import, the Atlantean hypothesis never gained any traction in the pedagogy of the Third Reich: neither school curricula nor the ideological propaganda distributed to the SS mentioned it, for example, nor did any of the other tools

used to disseminate teachings on the history of the race—a true testament to how marginal and frivolous it was believed to be.

OUR ANCESTORS THE ARYANS: ORIGIN MYTHS IN THE SCHOOLS

Nordicist concepts were, however, promoted vigorously by historians and educators: indeed, Nordicism became the official state history of the race under the Third Reich, as a series of three pedagogical texts from 1933, 1935, and 1938 amply demonstrate.

That this was so was due to the initiative of the Reich interior minister Wilhelm Frick, who on 9 May 1933 gave a major address on the teaching of history in the schools.⁶⁹ His remarks inspired a number of “ *Richtlinien für die Geschichtslehrbücher*” (directives for school history textbooks) addressed to the Länder on 20 July 1933 and subsequently published in the official bulletin of the Prussian Ministry of Education.⁷⁰ This document outlined the general principles that would guide the composition of all future textbooks and the shape of history curricula. Such oversight was essential to ensure that “the importance of the race be given just consideration” and to give prehistory the attention it deserved, since it “places the starting point of our continent’s historical process in our people’s original central European fatherland” and constituted the “national science par excellence (*Kossina*), for which there can be no substitute in combating the traditional devaluation of the level of cultural development of our Germanic ancestors.”⁷¹

The remainder of the document was dedicated to the new interpretation of various historical eras. Despite its opening manifesto, the prehistoric period was the subject of only about one-seventh of the text, while antiquity as a whole took up about one-third.

The teaching of ancient history would begin “with an account of prehistoric central Europe” that would show how “European history is the work of peoples of the Nordic race,” whose “high level of culture” was not necessarily visible in “the record of stone and bronze tools” of primitive peoples but legible in “the development of that original Nordic (Indo-Germanic) tongue, which triumphed over the languages of all the other races of Europe, save for a precious few.”

Texts and courses would together “trace a path to Asia Minor and North Africa, following the first Nordic migrations, which must have already taken place by the fifth millennium before our era,” as evidenced by “the skulls of Nordic peoples in the most ancient tombs of

Egypt and the well-known presence of blond peoples along the coasts of North Africa.” Here Frick named Georges Vacher de Lapouge and his 1899 book *L’Aryen, son rôle social* (The Aryan and his social role),⁷² just as he had previously cited Gustaf Kossina.

A litany of the ancient peoples with supposedly verified Nordic ancestry followed: the “Sumerians,” whose “racial provenance,” while not completely “clarified,” nevertheless suggested “a group of Nordic conquerors” as the sole causal factor explaining the similarities of Sumerian with the Indo-Germanic languages; then the “Indians, Medes, and Persians, as well as the Hittites,” whose “fate the student must relive as though they were related by blood;” up to the Germans themselves, peoples who had “created superior civilizations in India and Persia” before “disappearing beneath the numerically superior masses of those with foreign blood.”

But of course it was the Greeks and the Romans who assumed the starring roles in the new pedagogy. It was important that neither teachers nor students be left with any doubt about their racial origins, since both “the history of the Greeks” and “the history of the Nordic peoples of Italy” must have “proceeded from the lands of central Europe.”

The instructor would “once again emphasize that [the Greeks] are our closest racial brethren, which explains our intimate understanding of Greek art”—an implicit and piously reverential reference to Winckelmann, Hölderlin, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche. Greece had been colonized by “Nordic Greeks, who as conquerors had formed the dominant class of the country.”

The Romans, having also come from Nordic countries, would also be depicted in such a way that “their racial kinship should be deeply felt” by the student. It should not come as too much of a surprise that Hans Günther, and particularly his work on the Greeks and Romans, was made recommended reading for instructors, whose textbooks and ancient history courses would henceforth be designed by the illustrious professor.

A year and a half later, on 15 January 1935, an official decree by Bernhard Rust, the Reich minister for science and education, reaffirmed the Prussian guidelines and outlined the teacher’s role: “We must portray world history as the history of racially determined peoples. In lieu of the doctrine *ex oriente lux*, there must be a firm conviction that all of Western culture, at least, has been the world of the Nordic peoples, who established their dominance over the other races of Asia Minor, in Greece, in Rome, and in the other European countries.”⁷³

These two decrees of 1933 and 1935 were capped off by the institution of new secondary-school curricula in 1938, which declared that the “object of the teaching of history” was “the German people” and their “fight for their existence.”⁷⁴ Since the “idea of race”⁷⁵ was at the center of all instruction, the history of the Indo-Germanic race was to be the focus of all inquiry: “confidence in a great national destiny that encompasses the past and the future”⁷⁶ rested on a belief in a “consistent genetic heritage” that linked “the past directly to the present through blood inheritance.”⁷⁷

This new conception of the history of antiquity was not limited to the pious hopes and regulatory proclamations of ministerial decrees nor to the elaboration of new curricula. It was also echoed in school textbooks published after 1933, and made the subject of ongoing professional development courses for teachers and instructors in secondary schools, like that held in Vienna from 14 to 21 September 1941 by the Reich Ministry for Science and Education, attended by some fifty-two primary- and secondary-school teachers. After two opening sessions dedicated to concepts of race and space in history, further sessions were dedicated to each of the periods of “German history”:⁷⁸ after “German prehistory,” teachers were introduced to “the Orient and antiquity in the new history,” followed by the Middle Ages, the modern era, and the contemporary period. Eastern and Greco-Roman antiquity were thus subsumed as a period unto themselves within Nordic-Germanic history—that is, into the new history of Germany. This was a message with much broader implications.

There are many examples of this mental cartography of the origins of the Nordic race, whether from the four *German History* volumes published between 1937 and 1940 (popular works designed for the general public), the textbooks used in secondary-school classrooms under the Third Reich, the ideological pamphlets distributed to the Ordnungspolizei by the Hauptamt-SS, or *Die deutsche Polizei*, the house organ for information and coordination among the various branches of law enforcement. In all of them, the Aryan family appears to blossom from its Nordic cradle: the North, a rich fount of great migratory flows, as the womb of civilizations. Arrows represent the largest migrations, usually labeled with the name of the people or civilization begotten by Nordic seed: the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, the Persians, the Indians. If the arrows lacked a label, the map’s title or legend removed any ambiguity, as in one example from an SS pamphlet: “Nordic blood created the civilizations of Greece and the Holy Roman Empire.”⁷⁹ It could

hardly be made any more obvious. All these textbooks, histories, pamphlets, and articles were often no more than mindless explanations of maps, mere verbal mimicry: Nordic dogma on the origins of the great civilizations of antiquity needed to be ritually repeated, almost word for word, the maps themselves all drawn to the specifications of the same master.

The National Socialist discourse on origins thus enjoyed widespread currency beyond the schools: anything can be a form of pedagogy, and the Nazis' message could be transmitted in many different ways. Such maps quickly reveal themselves to be a stylistic exercise, an obligatory feature of all discourse on the history of the race: they adorned school textbooks, of course, but also more popular works on German history and more generally any textual discourse rooting the present and future in a past defined by blood. The diverse means by which this idea was communicated demonstrate an ambitious effort to reach several segments of the public. The Nordacist rewriting of the great Indo-Germanic racial past was not just the work of a small intelligentsia, destined solely for rote repetition in the schools and reserved only for the instructor and the parroting of their pupils. It was aimed at the entire German people: homemakers and heads of families, schoolmasters and students, police and SS, and both the secular and armed wings of the regime—whose relentless work of domestic surveillance and military conquest required continuous motivation from a belief system rooted in the depths of time.

THE INVENTION OF AN INDO-GERMANIC HERITAGE

It is easy to see, then, how Nordicism and the discourse on origins that it helped establish constituted a symbolic appropriation of antiquity to the point that “the history of Europe” became, in essence, “the history of the Nordic race.”⁸⁰ This equivalence, the Nazi youth magazine *Wille und Macht* argued, allowed them to claim paternity for the great achievements attributed to civilizations like those of Greece and Rome: “The superior civilizations created by the Indo-Germans in India, Persia, Greece, and Rome provide ample proof of the creativity of the Nordic spirit. The deterioration of the Nordic elite caused them to vanish. But today we still feel an essential kinship with these cultures, which come from the same origins.”⁸¹

Germany could boast of a rich and eclectic patrimony cobbled together from all the great Indo-Germanic cultural traditions, a potpourri of the

great and the sublime, a grandiose patchwork quilt of scattered elements drawn from across the centuries, whose only common thread lay in the blood of those who had produced them. A fine example of this invention of Indo-Germanic heritage is the short volume edited by Kurt Schrötter and Walther Wüst in 1940 on the concept of death in various Indo-Germanic cultures, a slender handbook modeled on the *consolatio*—the elegiac oration for the soldier who departs for the front and faces the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice. Titled *Tod und Unsterblichkeit: Aus indogermanischem Weistum* (Death and immortality: Indo-Germanic wisdom),⁸² this eighty-page pamphlet gathered eleven classical Greek and Latin texts, along with eleven from the Norse *Edda*, seven from Indian traditions, and fifty-eight other excerpts from German philosophy and literature, from Meister Eckhart to Alfred Rosenberg. In this compendium of Indo-Germanic culture, the words of Nietzsche, Homer, Empedocles, Tyrtaeus, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and the *Edda* rested happily alongside those of sacred Brahman texts, linked by their racial bond; the work of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (an author of rhythmic verse that exhorted Spartan soldiers marching off to combat) was juxtaposed to the letter of a contemporary young German soldier, whose final missive home from the field of battle, full of the elevated rhetoric of sacrifice and honor, rested side-by-side on the page with the Doric poet. Yet if the abundant historiography on the Nazi plundering of the great European art collections is to be believed,⁸³ it appears that there was no systematic approach or policy regarding the seizure of antique art. The primary prey of the Nazi *Kunst- und Kulturgüterraub*, entrusted to specific units and ad hoc commando groups,⁸⁴ seems to have been paintings from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, or alternatively prehistoric and medieval archaeological artifacts that had attracted the attention of the Ahnenerbe.

This symbolic annexation of European culture was also employed to justify subsequent, more substantial territorial and military occupations—an act of foreshadowing, for all great civilizations were but branches of the Nordic tree, and the Indo-Germanic race was simply returning to its ancestral home to reclaim possession of what was already rightfully its own.⁸⁵ A secondary-school text by Johannes Mahnkopf, published in 1942 at the apex of the Nazis' military and territorial expansion, went by the provocative title *On the Prehistory of the Greater German Reich*: the roots of this Greater Reich were buried deep in the fertile soil of the distant past, just as the ideas and books of Hans Günther had conjured them up from deep in the mists of time.⁸⁶

That the Aryans found themselves at home wherever they turned was amply reinforced by the presence of the swastika, which, from its beginnings as a mere political symbol, would become a piece of scientific evidence and a sign that the Nazis were reconquering lands where Nordic peoples had once planted their flag long, long ago.

A creation of the North, according to Rosenberg, the swastika had migrated along with the Indo-German peoples: “Since long before 3,000 B.C., Nordic folk waves carried these symbols, as can be proved, to Greece, Rome, Troy and India.”⁸⁷ As a symbol of German rebirth, the hakenkreuz, or crooked cross, now evoked “*Volk* honor and . . . living space,” a souvenir of “the time when, as a symbol of the Nordic wanderers and warriors, it went ahead to Italy and Greece.”⁸⁸

One short monograph published in 1934 claimed to offer a definitive history of the swastika.⁸⁹ After arguing that “the hakenkreuz originally belonged to the Indo-Germanic family that fanned out from northern Europe”—and that, as a consequence, “as descendants of these Germanic peoples, the Germans have an uncontested right to employ it”—the author delved into a detailed history of the symbol in Greek art, citing the great historian of art Alexander Conze⁹⁰ regarding the abundance of vases with the hakenkreuz recovered during the excavations of the Dipylon cemetery in Athens before noting that Schliemann had also unearthed a large number of artifacts with the swastika at Troy and Mycenae.⁹¹ The oldest swastikas, however, had been discovered in Scandinavia; according to the author, the antecedence of these “Germanic” traces to their Greek and Mycenaean counterparts helped explain the Nordic provenance of the peoples of the classical world. This proved that the Out-of-India hypothesis was false and must therefore be categorically rejected.⁹²

One of a series of party propaganda pamphlets aimed at the political commissars of the Wehrmacht—the Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffiziere (NSFO)⁹³—repeated Rosenberg’s claims and the book’s conclusions. After detailing at length the history and significance of the swastika, the leaflet offered a genealogy of the symbol: “The oldest archaeological finds in the Saale region prove that the Indo-Germanic peoples who lived in central Germany during the Paleolithic recognized the hakenkreuz. . . . From there it spread through the cultures along the Danube before extending its horizons to include the entire Mediterranean region. It migrated into Greece. It accompanied the Aryan expeditions into India, where it was found some two thousand years before our era.”⁹⁴

The swastika was thus the sun sign of Indo-Germanic conquest, evidence of the contiguity of the territories the race had once subjugated

and henceforth the banner under which they would be ruthlessly recaptured.

In September 1935, with the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws, the black swastika on a circular white background surrounded by a field of red became the new flag of the German state. One year later, during the Olympic Games held in Berlin, the exhibition *Sport der Hellenen* (along with its catalog)⁹⁵ presented reproductions of Greek cups and vases decorated with athletes throwing a discus embossed with the swastika: Indo-German Hellenism, and the profound racial and spiritual solidarity of the German and Greek peoples, on public display.⁹⁶

THE GODDESS EUROPE

The rewriting of ancient history led to the resurrection not of the vaguely oneiric, rose-colored antiquity of Weimar classicism but rather one remade in the image of a Greek goddess: a geographic metaphor with distinct political implications. After the attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Nazi propaganda began promoting a vision of Europe as a Nordic continental empire, united in combat against a Bolshevik and Semitic Asia, whose solidarity and identity drew strength from its common Indo-Germanic heritage.

One SS propaganda pamphlet took the idea of their Nordic heritage even further, declaring that “the history of the Germans is the history of the West, and likewise, the history of Europe is the history of the people who form its heart. . . . German history is, from its beginnings, not just that of a single nation but that of the entire continent.” This strict equivalence drew on racial identity, the vision of a Europe mobilizing for a common future goal, the construction of a new order, and the conquering of land to the east, built on a foundation of history with a sprinkling of biology thrown in. The same document drew a map, sketched in broad strokes, of Europe and its surrounding environment, situated in the broader, all-encompassing context of the history of the Nordic race: “The birth of Europe, a geographic concept that captures at once the goal and boundaries of our imperial idea, dates far back in time, to the birth of the Indo-Germanic peoples. The fate of the continent, the original homeland of the Nordic race, is closely linked to the evolution of the Indo-Germanic peoples, who came from there. The Indians and Iranians alone emigrated, wandering off into the vast lands of Asiatic space and losing their identity. The Greeks and Romans moved within Europe, while the Celts and Germans remained far longer in their original home.”⁹⁷

Another SS pamphlet, intended for the ideological indoctrination of the troops, implicitly picked up on the same theme. A concise, illustrated paradigm of Nazi racism, the booklet dedicated its lengthy opening chapters to an exposition on the history of the race—its origins and the evolution of its world view and history under Nazism. Its version of *ex septentrione lux* tellingly stated: “We don’t claim, as science once insisted, that ‘light came from the East,’ but rather that ‘strength comes from the North.’”⁹⁸ This creative might, builder of civilizations, resided in the blood, which, through regular waves of migration, had preserved and renewed an endangered Nordic culture whose only pure and rightful contemporary inheritors were the SS themselves. This argument was pushed even further in an article published in the journal *Die deutsche Polizei*, which reiterated the Nazi historical and racial-genetic party line with admirable consistency and supporting documentation, offering a chronological examination of the three great waves of Nordic migration: those which took place in 5000 BC, 500 BC, and AD 300, “after which German blood circulated throughout all the European nations,”⁹⁹ beginning, of course, with the German heartland itself. In essence, Germany “is not only the center of the European world, but it has also always been the source of its blood and its strength.”¹⁰⁰

European unity thus “[rested] on the strength of its kinship of race and blood.” It was good, then, that “the Nordic race throughout the millennia [shaped] Europe and the world.” The presence of Nordic blood across the continent was in fact “the first cornerstone of Europe.”¹⁰¹

A third educational pamphlet reiterated this concept. Designed to provide a tutorial on the Nazi struggle to reorganize Europe, the booklet rooted this project within the immemorial history of the aforementioned waves of Indo-Germanic migrations and conquests. Titled *Deutschland ordnet Europa neu!* (Germany reorganizes Europe!), the 1942 pamphlet examined various potential definitions of the continent in order to highlight the shortcomings of formal geography. “The quarrels of geographers do not interest us,” it declared, since their criteria—mountains, land, and water—were powerless to discern the *Wesen*, or “essence,” of Europe, which could be understood only in terms of race: “When we speak of Europe from a political point of view, we refer to not a geographically bounded continent but the living space of a family of peoples who share biologically related, if not identical, roots.”¹⁰²

The first power to unify all of Europe, from a military or legal point of view, had been Nordic: the Roman Empire. The Romans, whom the pamphlet considered to have been originally made up of “Indo-

Germanic countrymen,” were “good jurists” and “good soldiers,” two qualities that had allowed them to create a model empire, strong, peaceful, and centrally organized, a product of laws that were the expression of the Indo-Germanic will to organize the cosmos and establish order: “Just as Aryan India gave the world its most profound mysticism, Aryan Persia its most beautiful mythology, and Ancient Greece its highest art, Rome gave the world its most sophisticated legal system.”¹⁰³ The first empire (*Ordnungsmacht*) of Europe, Rome had then passed the torch to another imperium, a new Reich: Germany.

The German Reich had almost always been the primary organizing power of Europe: in the Middle Ages, the Reich had fought against the church and its universalist message, in favor of a “politics of empire against the papacy”¹⁰⁴ that had constituted its medieval *raison d’être*—the Christian universalist message signifying a degeneration of Roman law, which had been contaminated by a reprehensible egalitarianism introduced by “Negroids”¹⁰⁵ like Caracalla. The booklet could thus conclude that “ideologically, we see our battle for the reorganization of Europe as a capstone ending two thousand years of world history, and as the beginning of a new era.”¹⁰⁶ Nothing new here under the sun: Europe, since the dawn of time, had only extended as far as the conquering spirit, military valor, and courage of the Indo-Germans had allowed it; that is to say, all the way to the distant reaches of the Far East. “From a purely spatial point of view, Europe depends on these vast Asian lands. Long ago, men of the European race penetrated far into the East. India and Iran were the end points of these migratory expeditions that had begun in Europe.”¹⁰⁷

Penetrating the East and conquering the vast Slavic lands were thus age-old problems. Europe’s horizons, since at least the time of antiquity, had been set by the vast spaces of the Slavic and Asiatic Orient.¹⁰⁸

GENEALOGY AND THE ORIGIN STORY: THE DESCENT OF MAN

There is a fine line between history and mythology,¹⁰⁹ and the science of history, as we have seen, can sometimes lend mythmaking a helping hand: the documents cited above, such as the popular or scholarly books by big-name authors, with their footnotes, indexes, and bibliographies, endowed a theoretical discourse that tended toward outright fantasy with the full intellectual imprimatur of an academic science. The universities abdicated their ethical obligation to the pursuit of truth

and became the docile servants of an ideology that demanded its mythology be transformed, through the addition of a critical apparatus, conventional rhetoric, and basic formatting, into scientific truth. *Historia ancilla ideologiae*: History became the handmaiden of ideology. Rather than keep its sights set on the eternal and universal, the academy compromised itself with the contingent and sectarian, participating actively in that partisan instrumentalization of reason denounced since the 1930s by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School¹¹⁰ and, in France, by scholars like Paul Nizan.¹¹¹

History made itself the servant of a myth and a fantasy. Nazism, engorged on its own mythopoetics, created a fable that recounted the history of a group, the race, according to the dictates of its own ideological principles.

These principles were so basic, and claimed themselves to be so self-evident, that it was as if history was rewritten in reverse: the ideologized present would redesign the nation's past (the medieval period) and then forge a new racial past (the prehistoric and ancient eras), in order to demonstrate certain basic concepts and answer its own immediate contemporary political needs. The principles that governed the Nazi world view were thus crudely imposed upon thousands of years of history, reread, reinvented, and rewritten to demonstrate the validity of the principles themselves. History thus had to serve and retrospectively validate the very ideological principles that required history itself to be rewritten. This thoroughly false empirical validation *ab historia* completed a vicious epistemological circle in which falsehoods gave birth to lies and, in return, the fabrications built upon them engendered further deceit. In essence, the message conveyed by Nazi rewriting of history was this: "What we claim to be the truth is true because we say it is, and furthermore, history shows that it has always been." What this circular logic neglected to state, of course, was that Nazi "history" had already been assigned the very specific task of validating the Nazis' claims. Having lost all consideration and respect for history (*Geschichte*) itself, the historical profession (*Geschichtswissenschaft* or *Historie*) showed quite clearly that it no longer cared about the past but rather had placed itself entirely in the service of the present. Rewritten, mutilated, at best fantasized or outright invented, the past was no longer valued in and of itself: historians had abandoned their concern for the vanished past, along with their scrupulous respect for the dead.

This critique of instrumental reason applied to history is not meant as a valiant effort to break down doors that for the most part are already

wide open, or as an opening statement in a trial that has long since been concluded. While it remains shocking how the entire apparatus of the academy was so eager to accept this discourse, it is far more interesting and important to understand what possessed these historians and professors to embrace the party line. Nordic theory was already familiar in Germany, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its radicalization in the hands of the Nazis had been endorsed without too much rancor or reticence by the academy because it filled a psychological need for self-confidence and reinforced a fragile German national identity that had been weakened further after 1918. In the context of the Aryanization of German public life within which the academy found itself immersed after April 1933, the scholarly profession witnessed a sudden flowering of opportunists, careerists, and fellow travelers, many of them among the best of their generation. “Careerist” and “opportunist” surely describe those historians who, after 1945, found it relatively easy and painless to maintain their positions and continue their work, in certain cases well into the 1970s, without ever referring to racialist discourse or repeating what they said or wrote under the Third Reich: men like Joseph Vogt¹¹² or Helmut Berve.¹¹³ Only in rare cases was it a matter of fanatical conviction. Indeed, a typology of the later careers of those scholars who contributed to the abuse of the classical past would be an interesting exercise, albeit one beyond the scope of this book.

Such historiography and such teaching of history constitute clear instances of what Julien Benda called, in his famous 1927 essay, the *trahison des clercs*: instead of promoting the universal and rational, these scholars placed themselves in the service of the narrowest of particular interests, that of class or race. But then, the voluntary servitude of the modern intellectual was, in the eyes of the somewhat Germanophobic Benda, a peculiarly German phenomenon: “It must be said that the German ‘clerks’ led the way in this adhesion of the modern ‘clerk’ to patriotic fanaticism. . . . The nationalist ‘clerk’ is essentially a German invention”¹¹⁴—an invention, to be more precise, of twentieth-century Germany.

It is important to keep in mind that the Nazis in fact drew heavily upon mainstream German historiography of the nineteenth century and its various associated myths: they did not invent either the concept of Helleno-German kinship or the Aryan myth. Rather, in defining and defending the race, they merely reiterated and forcibly imposed the ideas of others, such as that of the Nordic origins of all Aryan culture.

The devolution of the historical sciences, archaeology, and anthropology under the Third Reich can be seen as a logical consequence of the

role assigned to and played by these disciplines in the process of constructing national identities in the nineteenth century. As Anne-Marie Thiesse has written, in order to construct a nation at the time, “it was not enough to have inventoried [one’s] heritage; one had better also invent it.”¹¹⁵ It was this labor of invention, in the threefold sense of discovery, interpretation, and also pure and simple fabrication, that made these disciplines, alongside literature and folklore (*Volkskunde*), so ideal.

The medievalist Patrick Geary has noted that it was in Germany that a particularly zealous, ideologically driven historiography first emerged during the building of the nation, buttressing the myth of autochthony, defending the primitivity of the German tongue, and proclaiming—in a completely fantastical manner—the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural continuity of the inhabitants of German soil. Just as “the existence of European nations begins with the identification of their ancestors” and “every birth establishes its own parentage,”¹¹⁶ German historiography made a fervent sacrifice to the cult of one of the idols denounced by Marc Bloch, that of origins, an “embryogenic obsession”¹¹⁷ that he believed to be fundamentally German: “What word of ours could ever succeed in rendering the force of the famous Germanic prefix *Ur*: *Urmensch*, *Urdichtung*?”¹¹⁸

In Germany this constituted a pseudoscience that endowed the German nation and all other European nations with the “tools of their national self-creation,” above all “‘scientific’ history and Indo-European philology.”¹¹⁹ Geary’s argument challenged and chastised the nationalist historiographies of the nineteenth century: “Their notion of history is static. . . . This is the very antithesis of history. This history of European peoples in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages is not the story of a primordial moment but of a continuous process. . . . It is a history of constant change, of radical discontinuities, and of political zigzags, masked by the repeated re-appropriation of old words to define new realities.”¹²⁰

European nationalisms and nationalist historiographies in fact shared, in Germany as in France, a common essentialism that consisted of fixing national identity in some immutable substance immune from evolution. In the final analysis, this discourse denied the very essence of history. This was particularly marked in the case of Nazism, which displayed a deep antipathy toward and anxiety regarding the very idea of history, which is defined by change over time. The nationalist discourses of the nineteenth century, and later Nazism itself, could not accept any doubts about the past or uncertainty over the future, out of fear for the hypothetical immortality of the race.

CONCLUSION

We have thus seen how the National Socialist party adopted a discourse on the origins of the Nordic race as early as 1920. In his founding speech of 13 August 1920, Hitler described the Nordic march of civilization, raising the Aryan to pyro- and photophore, bringer of fire and light from Europe's frozen north. High antiquity thus showed its Aryan face at work: the explorer, creator of culture, builder of states, societies, and great works of art, all emanating from its original boreal home.

The idea of a single common home of all the cultures of the white race had been accorded legitimacy since the end of the eighteenth century, with the elaboration of the Aryan or Indo-European myth. A German nationalism in search of its own truth and validation simply displaced the center of gravity from India to northern Europe. This Nordification of the Indo-European thesis was brutally and dogmatically enforced as truth by the Nazis, who viewed the Orientalist notion of the Out-of-India hypothesis as an obstacle and an insult: it deprived the North of its maternal prestige and glorified an East otherwise vilified by Nazi racism. It was ideologically imperative that the traditional notion of *ex oriente lux* give way completely to the *ex septentrione lux* prevalent in nineteenth-century German thought.

This discourse possessed two functions. Above all, it aimed to flatter German national identity by extolling the virtues of its racial origins: born in large part from the humiliation and defeat of 1918, National Socialism—beginning with Hitler himself—saw itself as rearming German self-esteem (*Selbstbewusstsein*), the nation's self-confidence having been badly shattered by the collapse of the empire, the diktat of Versailles, and the civic, political, and financial troubles of the first years of the Weimar Republic.

This discourse assumed such importance that it was broadcast widely, using multiple mechanisms of transmission: the speeches and proclamations of Nazi leaders, beginning with Hitler and Rosenberg, as well as the work of racial theoreticians like Hans Günther, but also art, scholarly research, teaching in the schools, and ideological propaganda distributed to the police and armed forces. Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf* that the Aryan was the Prometheus of humanity; the mimicry of this fecund theme in Nazi sculpture transformed his words into stone.

What was silently suggested in the marble or granite dotting the public sphere was also taught explicitly in the schools: the directives of 1933 on history textbooks, followed by new curricula established in

1938, expressly defined the tenor of courses on the history of the race as the glorification of Nordic genius. Professors and researchers in the nation's universities or the many research organizations of the new Germany saw nothing wrong with supporting Nordic theory in scholarly work on the swastika in prehistory or the "life rune" in Sweden and northern Italy.

The second function of this discourse on origins was to feed Germans' expansionist and annexationist imagination. If men had come from the North to create all the most prestigious civilizations of the past—if the North was really the "womb of nations," as Jordanes had trumpeted—the Nordic race could claim wherever it wanted as its ancestral home. This symbolic appropriation of the most celebrated patrimony of world history was a prerequisite and prelude to more tangible material and territorial conquests. Nordicist discourse allowed the Aryan race to claim the rich historic and artistic heritage of the great civilizations of the Mediterranean, which suddenly found itself under hyperborean skies.