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To take the measure of things and their  
mismeasure, to reason unto unreason, to  
suffer to count and to be accountable—such  
is the ratio of that form of life called the  
human.

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# THE GEOGRAPHY OF IDENTITY

Edited by Patricia Yaeger

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tives had lost touch with their German history and identity. It was bad enough, for example, that the castle town Krummrau (from *krumme Au* "twisted Au") was regularly spelled with a single *m* according to the Czech fashion (a flurry of protests and petitions orchestrated by the same author actually restored Krummrau's authentic German spelling to some maps of the region); even worse, whole Czech words often blended with German words to create completely new names. According to this author, the town Unter-Wulldau offered a particularly disastrous example of this kind of creolization. Situated on the Moldau River downstream from the town of Ober-Moldau, Unter-Wulldau derived its name from a mixing of the German Moldau with the Czech *Vltava*, both names for the same river (*Vltava + Moldau = Wulldau*).

Such articles alerted Germans to reflect on the names they gave their local surroundings. Their deeper aim, however, was to redefine the natural landscape itself as national property. Having read such a detailed article on linguistic origins, village inhabitants could never again look upon the landscape, dominated by either the mountain peak or the river, without reflecting on their German identity.

The high point of activity for nationalists on the frontier came with the decennial censuses of 1880, 1890, and 1900. The publication of the first of these seemed to justify the new nationalist arguments, which no longer measured a nation's importance by its degree of civilization but by the numbers of people it could muster.<sup>32</sup> German liberals read the 1880 census as a confirmation of their community's decline. This was largely due to recent political events and not to any particular statistical result. Had they retained control of the political system, for example, or successfully blocked some of the Iron Ring's linguistic reforms, German nationalists might well have continued to justify their predominance solely in terms of cul-

<sup>32</sup> There are remarkably few good analyses of social and political issues surrounding the decennial censuses in the Habsburg Monarchy. One of these, which relies on examples from Italian- and Slovene-speaking regions, is Emil Brix, "Die Erhebung der Umgangssprache im zisleithanischen Österreich (1880-1910). Nationale und sozio-ökonomischen Ursachen der Sprachkonflikte," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichte*, no. 87 (Vienna, 1979): 363-439. See also Cohen's excellent analysis of the censuses in Prague.

tural achievement. Under the new political circumstances, however, their permanent minority status in provinces like Bohemia and Moravia itself became a cause for concern. The census enabled German nationalists to express their losses through the use of statistics, to map them, to shade their regions, and to locate linguistic boundaries with some accuracy. German nationalists might not accept the results of the 1880 census, might accuse the Czechs of all manner of chicanery, but they nevertheless used the census as a standard against which to measure future gains and losses.

In 1890 the Union of Bohemian Woods provided its members with several detailed strategies for dealing with the next census. The association changed its goal from raising the general proportion of German speakers in Bohemia to establishing that, although a frontier area, the Bohemian Woods was itself purely German. This change followed a general reorientation of German political strategy in the 1880s. Recognizing that the Iron Ring's suffrage reforms had made it impossible ever to regain a political majority in the Bohemia Diet, German nationalists instead demanded that the government enact a complete administrative separation between Czech and German regions of Bohemia. If the census results categorized the Bohemian Woods as a mixed region rather than as a purely German one, administrative separation would be far more difficult to achieve. The Czechs might even gain part of the region, some German speakers might eventually find themselves trapped in a Czech district, or the government would conclude that separation on the basis of language was impossible to achieve. Nationalist activists accused their Czech counterparts of stopping at nothing to achieve the latter result from the census:

The Czechs will not even concede to us national rights and peace in our own regions [emphasis added]; they claim, in fact, that no closed, German-speaking region in Bohemia exists at all. They want to prove that Czechs live in every part of Bohemia, while Germans do not, that there is no place where Czechs do not live alongside Germans.... One of our rival associations makes no secret of its policy to send agents into purely German regions ... in order to create a small Czech enclave there.... If a handful of Czech speakers ... is employed as servants in a German town, then it isn't long before some leading [Czech] personality arrives demanding Czech schools

... which create new burdens for the German municipalities and sow disunity among their inhabitants.<sup>33</sup>

The writer of this article echoed the class-based resentments of an educated German minority, angry that the presence of a handful of uneducated Czech servants might be enough to discredit the authentically German identity of a region. The bitter realization that arriving Czech workers no longer willing to convert to a German identity or to learn the German language might threaten their region's traditional identity also led activists to blame Czech nationalists for "creating" false Czech populations where they would not otherwise have existed. As one writer noted, "Until now numerous Czech immigrants, almost all members of the lowest classes, willingly renounced their nationality and attached themselves to the Germans." The growing presence of Czech voluntary associations in German communities encouraged those workers who might have learned German to adhere instead to a Czech national identity.<sup>34</sup>

So far I have concentrated on tracing the rhetorical strategies employed by German nationalists. But how did these rhetorical transformations shape Austrian political culture? How politically effective was this nationalization of local identities? The old German liberal political culture of the 1860s and 1870s had functioned primarily in parliamentary coalitions created by regional bourgeois elites, all interested in maintaining the power of the central state. By contrast, the new politics rested on its ability to frame popular local identities in universal German terms. These identities in turn demanded unified action from the nation against the anti-German efforts of the central state.

Using aids like the relief map of Southern Bohemia cited at the outset to produce knowledge about local landscapes and peoples across the monarchy created important political consequences. German-speaking people in mixed regions often

<sup>33</sup> See the article "Zur Volkszählung" in *MDB*, no. 23 (December 1890): 241-42. The article provided several "horror stories" from the 1880 census involving German speakers who had been mistakenly categorized as Czechs due to the ruthless efforts of pro-Czech bureaucrats.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hainisch, *Die Zukunft der Deutsch-Österreicher. Eine statistische-volkswirtschaftliche Studie* (Vienna: F. Deuticke, 1892) 9.

came to see themselves primarily in nationalist terms, and German speakers in the "homogenous" regions did come to identify their interests with those of their brethren on the frontier. Together, they created a popular, interregional German politics whose success constituted nothing short of a revolution in political behavior. The story of the Cilli (Cilje) crisis of 1894-95 illustrates the ways in which this interregional German nationalist identity exerted political influence. In 1893 the German Liberal party had finally returned to power in coalition with two other parties. One of the legacies of the pro-Slav Iron Ring government (1879-93) had been an agreement to fund a Slovene-language secondary school in the Styrian town of Cilli. The new Liberal government had no say in the matter; it simply had to budget the funds to administer this decision. When the new cabinet took up this minor administrative matter, however, it was shocked by the intensity of public reaction.

As expected, local German nationalists in Styria complained that placing a Slovene school in a *Sprachinsel*, an embattled German town surrounded by a Slovene hinterland, constituted an act of national expropriation. What astonished most politicians, however, was the intensity of the response among German speakers in other parts of the monarchy. For the first time, Bohemian and Moravian public opinion looked beyond its regional political interests to identify with the plight of a German community in far-away southern Styria. Clearly, these German speakers had adopted a transregional and spatially oriented concept of national identity, one that staked a claim to those territories, wherever in the monarchy, that were and must remain German. The extraordinary public outcry convinced the reluctant German Liberal party leaders to withdraw support from their own cabinet or risk losing the next elections to the more radically nationalist anti-Semites.

The relatively mild Cilli crisis was followed by serious outbreaks of public violence at the publication of the Baden Language Ordinances for Bohemia and Moravia in 1897. The willingness of German speakers of all classes in Reichenberg, Graz, Brünn, or Vienna to take to the streets to fight legislation for Bohemia and Moravia that they all claimed deprived them of their "national property" ended any hopes for resolving nationalist conflict through negotiation. After this incident bureaucratic rule by decree gradually replaced the liberal parliamentary process.

Both these examples point to the power and limits of the nationalist revolution as well as to the far-reaching consequences of grounding national identity in spatial terms. While the new nationalist movement effectively coordinated an inter-regional nationalist system of defense, it was ultimately incapable of fostering a positive and unified national program, one organized around a single compelling understanding of German identity. If their new nationalist efforts had helped to bring the Liberals back into power in 1893, it had also caused their downfall. In 1895 the German liberals found themselves once more in the ranks of the parliamentary opposition, this time thanks to the very success of their populist nationalism rather than because of their lack of committed supporters. They now experienced with bitterness the fruit of their efforts to construct a mass politics, victims, in a sense, of their own success. They had devoted significant resources and plenty of rhetoric in the 1880s to mobilizing the public around nationalist issues in order to regain control of the state. Yet once they had accomplished this aim, the nationalist fervor they had unleashed turned against the state itself.<sup>35</sup> In fact, many activists now regretted the breakdown of public order that accompanied interregional nationalist agitation, and some of them began to question the more radically essentialist arguments about national identity that their followers had deployed. In a revealing article analyzing the results of the 1900 census, the Union of the Bohemian Woods seems to have repudiated numbers and ethnic purity for an older and recognizably liberal rhetoric of cultural supremacy, to justify German hegemony in local relations in that ethnically mixed region:

The absolute numbers of the census results are not the correct standard for measuring the relative significance [status] of a national group in a particular district or region. Of far greater meaning is the tax contribution, the degree of education, and other cultural markers. In ethnically mixed regions

the political influence of one or another nation cannot simply be measured by the statistical size of each nation.<sup>36</sup>

Here we see a belated attempt to bring order and hierarchy back into the German community from above by returning to the older liberal values of education and property and downplaying the newer nationalist arguments that relied on numbers and territories. If "cultural markers" justified assigning the Germans a greater influence than their numerical minority status would allow, then the same values act as implicit standards to determine hierarchies within the German community itself. At the same time, giving greater weight to those cultural markers diminished the importance of linguistic or ethnic identity.

The creation of a mass politics organized around German identities and rooted in local geography replaced several traditional forms of community hierarchy with one standard of absolute value: Germanness. Much social and political conflict at the turn of the century came to be expressed using the rhetoric of Germanness. If one defined it in terms of civilization, education, or property ownership, then traditional elite groups might use Germanness to maintain their influence within this ever-expanding political community. If, however, one defined Germanness in other ways, as for example in terms of racial authenticity, then Germanness might become a tool for social revolution, for replacing the leadership of traditional bourgeois elites with that of emerging populist activists. In both cases, the location of Germanness in regional geography and identities had replaced the vague abstract culture of values it had encompassed in the liberal era (1848-79). If this culture had formerly hovered tantalizingly over several kinds of geographic and cultural spaces in Central Europe, it was now firmly anchored in specific places identifiable on a map.

Superficially at least, the creation of the Austrian Republic solved the question of ethnically mixed regions for many German speakers after 1918, as did the expulsion of the Sudeten and Moravian Germans from Czechoslovakia after 1945. Austria became an ethnically German state, while Bohemia and Moravia became ethnically Czech. Yet the fact that most Austro-Germans no longer lived in close contact with neighbors

<sup>35</sup> For a general account of the Cilli crisis from the point of view of party politics, see Lothar Höbelt, *Kornblume und Kaiserrotler* (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1993) 106-16.

<sup>36</sup> MDB, no. 44 (1901): 5.



who spoke different languages seems to have made little difference in how they understood their community identities. For many of them, their national identity continued to be shaped by the nineteenth-century nationalist rhetoric about society that had emerged from liberal traditions in the 1880s. This rhetoric combined public community equality for Germans, however defined, with veiled concepts of hierarchy meant to distinguish Germans from those ethnic and racial others who remained outside the imagined community of German citizens. But this rhetoric also continued the ideological innovations of the 1880s, which had located national identity spatially in particularly *German* spaces. This helps to explain an apparent paradox that recent travelers in the Czech Republic, including this writer, have noted: the vociferous descendants of the Sudeten Germans argue at every opportunity on their visits there that the Bohemian Woods, although now inhabited only by Czech speakers, is in fact German.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> In the summer of 1989 I made the first of several research trips to the Bohemian Woods. Before crossing into still-Communist Czechoslovakia I climbed a tower that had been erected in Austria at the top of a hill to afford tourists a view across the border. The place had been dubbed the *Moldaublick*, and indeed, each of us binocularized tourists had a splendid view of the southern Bohemian Woods. At the *Moldaublick* I read an informative historical description of the view in a pamphlet printed by the nearby Gemeinde Ulrichsberg, as well as a poem entitled "Verlorene Heimat" (Lost Homeland), which was provided free of charge to all visitors. What struck me about this poem was not so much the expected lament for a lost homeland but rather the specificity with which the poem located this idealized *Heimat* village of Glöckelberg in the landscape itself. One could stand atop the tower armed only with the poem and locate Glöckelberg's geographic situation, its placement in a certain valley, and its relation to other natural and manmade landmarks. Yet it was not so much the geographic content of the poetry that intrigued me but rather the confident identification of the natural landscape itself with a German national identity. That former Bohemian Germans and their descendants might harbor a sense of ownership about lost communities, houses, or views is hardly remarkable. But what did require some explanation was the confident endorsement of the very physical landscape itself with a transhistorical German identity.