



Sweeping the German Nation

Domesticity and National Identity
in Germany, 1870-1945

NANCY R. REAGIN

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Is cleanliness next to Germanness, as some nineteenth-century nationalists insisted? This book explores the relationship among gender roles, domesticity, and German national identity between 1870 and 1945. After German unification, approaches to household management that had originally emerged among the bourgeoisie became central to German national identity by 1914. Thrift, order, and extreme cleanliness, along with particular domestic markers (e.g., the linen cabinet) and holiday customs, were used by many Germans to define the distinctions between themselves and neighboring cultures. What was bourgeois at home became German abroad, as “German domesticity” also helped to define and underwrite colonial identities in Southwest Africa and elsewhere. After 1933, this idealized notion of domestic Germanness was racialized even further and incorporated into an array of Nazi social politics. In occupied Eastern Europe during World War II, Nazi women’s groups used these approaches to household management in their attempt to “Germanize” Eastern European women who were part of a large-scale project of population resettlement and ethnic cleansing.

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For my parents

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It is customary to close one's acknowledgments by mentioning the family members who supported one's work. I think that it is common to give family the pride of place because it is the children, spouses, and other family members of academics who bear the most intimate burdens associated with research, and who are asked to do the most, to make the work possible.

Certainly, that is true in my case. Bill Offutt, my husband, has been my life's greatest blessing. None of my accomplishments, among them this book, would have happened without him. But because I've already

dedicated one book to him, I'd like to dedicate this one to my parents, who helped make me what I am. My debt to them truly can never be repaid, but only acknowledged. In my "choice" of parents (as in so much else in my life) I am one of the most fortunate of women.

Sweeping the German Nation

Domesticity and National Identity in Germany, 1870–1945

Introduction

In the domestic tradition of the German wife and mother, I see a more secure guarantee of our political future than in any of our fortresses.

Otto von Bismarck

This book explores the gendered aspects of what has undoubtedly been the most successful ideology to emerge during the last two centuries: nationalism. Nationalism is sometimes discussed only in terms of its more extreme or vivid manifestations: political organizations that seek independence for an ethnic group, or right-wing movements that attempt to take over a preexisting state. In such older narratives, the nation is presented as a work of men: its origin is told as a story of war, conquest, or revolution. But as historians of cultural nationalism have noted, nationalism can also be expressed in the more everyday forms that help to create and sustain national identity: the shared rituals, values, symbols, and assumptions that bind people together as a nation. Some forms of cultural nationalism (national holidays or symbols such as flags) may be consciously and fervently embraced by some of the citizenry. Other manifestations of nationality have blended into the fabric of daily life, so much so that they are hardly noticed by the nation's citizens. Such quotidian aspects of the nation constitute what Michael Billig calls "banal nationalism," the daily habits of social

life, of thinking and of language, that help to reproduce established nations.¹

In both its obvious and banal aspects, the nation is always a work in progress: national boundaries, symbols, political systems, and identities can and do alter substantially over time. After Italy was welded together out of disparate regions during the 1860s, one of the most prominent Italian nationalist activists, Massimo d'Azeglio, proclaimed, "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." Similar to other protonations, the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula, who spoke a plethora of mutually incomprehensible dialects, nonetheless shared a preexisting sense of culture, of peopledom. But many features of the nation were not yet determined and had to be hammered out over decades: what the national language was to be; the nation's boundaries and whether border regions (which were often culturally hybrid) were to be included; and unifying practices such as national rituals, holidays, and symbols. "Invented traditions," created to unify coalescing nations, abounded during the nineteenth century and were usually represented as a revival of "ancient" rituals or symbols of the nation in question.²

Like Italy, Germany was a late-forming nation, a state created out of regions that shared a long-standing sense of belonging to Germanism but that also had strong regional and local identities.³ The unified

¹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 8. Billig argues, "The most endemic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building."

² See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 2.

³ There is a substantial literature of the long-enduring strength of regional loyalties and identities in Germany that sometimes existed in tension with the claims of the nation-state. Some historians argue that German national identity was notable (compared to some European states) for the strength of Germans' regional identities and the resulting federalism in its governmental structure. See particularly Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Abigail Green, *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a discussion of work published during the last decade on

German nation-state not only had to win citizens' loyalties in a culture where most people had strong preexisting regional allegiances and identities (e.g., as Bavarians or Saxons), but also faced the challenge inherent in the fact that the new German state could not claim to represent all ethnic Germans. The particular geographic boundaries that were established in 1871 were not identical with the world of the German *Kulturvolk*, because millions of German speakers lived in the Hapsburg Empire (where they felt perfectly "at home" and had no loyalty to Germany), scattered across the Russian Empire, and indeed in communities of ethnic Germans around the globe.⁴ As in Italy, nationalists therefore faced the challenge of inventing "Germans": a form of national identity compatible with Germany's new boundaries and state developed only slowly, in tension and in conjunction with both strong regional identities and the broader identity of a far-flung *Kulturvolk* that transcended Germany's actual boundaries.

In "inventing" Imperial Germany, nationalists could therefore count on the fact that almost all Germans defined themselves as a people with a shared culture (a *Kulturvolk*), but the process of working out a political national identity that was firmly tied to Germany's specific borders was more difficult and halting. The designation of a national anthem or the establishment of a repertoire of patriotic songs is only one example of how German-speaking Europe's shared culture complicated the creation of an Imperial German nationality. As scholars of German musicology have noted, compared with other contemporary Western nations, "Imperial Germany operated from the start with a deficit of national symbols," and German-speaking Europe's musical

this subject, see Nancy Reagin, "Recent Work on German National Identity: Regional? Imperial? Gendered? Imaginary?" *Central European History* 37 (June 2004): 245–71. See also Harold James, *A German Identity, 1770–1990* (New York: Routledge, 1989) for a quite different argument. For the origins and development of Germany as a nation defined by a shared culture, see Otto Dann, "Nationale Fragen in Deutschland: Kulturnation, Volksnation, Reichsnation," in Etienne Francois, Hannes Siegrist, and Jakob Vogel, eds., *Nation und Emotion: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich, 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 66–82.

⁴ On the German global diaspora, see Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy R. Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

canon (although it was illustrious) could not be easily used to remedy this lack.⁵ Many important patriotic music pieces could not be simply adopted by late-nineteenth-century German nationalists, because these pieces were celebrating a cultural German nation that differed substantially from the actual political nation established in 1871. Imperial Germany never did adopt a national anthem. Other efforts to create unifying German public rituals, holidays, or symbols have generally been seen by historians as only partially successful.⁶

But although the process was halting, a national identity that many Germans subscribed to was certainly in place by 1914. Over decades, particularist or regional political parties slowly declined in Imperial Germany, as local identities were reconciled with (and sometimes eclipsed by) national identity.⁷ Dynastic figures often served as unifying symbols for the nation in their roles within public festivities. And the shared experiences of the wars of German unification formed a basis for the creation of shared public memories and rituals that memorialized the “founding years,” with its heroes and battles.⁸ As in other nations, print media helped to articulate and solidify a sense of national community that was linked to Germany’s actual political borders.

Some of the most successful aspects of the shared national community were those that were rooted in the private sphere. During the late nineteenth century, notions of Germanness expressed within the household became popular and were often more widely shared than many “public” manifestations of German national identity. Thus, Sedan Day failed as a national holiday in Imperial Germany, but Christmas celebrations (both public and private) grew explosively during the same period, as Christmas – with its domestic values and symbols – came to

⁵ Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter, eds., *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 16.

⁶ For the limited success of attempts to construct national holidays or symbols, see Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor*; and also Wolfgang Hartwig, “Bürgertum, Staatssymbolik und Staatsbewusstsein 1871–1914,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 16 (1990): 269–95.

⁷ The decline of regional particularist parties was widespread by 1900, although, as Abigail Green notes, regional institutions and governments still remained particularly strong in Germany.

⁸ See Jean Quataert, *Staging Philanthropy: Patriotic Women and the National Imagination in Dynastic Germany, 1813–1916* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

be seen as *the* German holiday *par excellence*, observed even by some German Jews.

This book argues that the articulation of Germanness came to include a particular domestic identity that was interwoven with the period's dominant notions of gender.⁹ The evolution of gender roles in German society during the late nineteenth century produced an ideal of the "German" housewife, household, and domestic practices that became interwoven with Germans' national identity. This ideal was also enshrined in discussions of colonial German households in German Southwest Africa before 1914. These understandings of German domesticity and housekeeping were further articulated and promoted by Germany's large housewives' organizations and increasingly incorporated into public policy after World War I. Under the National Socialists, this domestic ideal of national identity was racialized (a process that had begun before World War I), becoming one part of the mix of racism and misogyny that drove Nazi family policy. It also underlay the housekeeping and consumption practices urged on German women by Nazi women's organizations.

Finally, a particular set of convictions about what made up "German" domesticity helped to inform the work of Nazi women's groups in occupied Poland during World War II. This book discusses briefly how Nazi women participated in ethnic-cleansing campaigns, a topic treated at greater length by Elizabeth Harvey's *Women and the Nazi East*.¹⁰ Although I touch on this, I am more interested in how Reich German women brought to Poland worked to "re-Germanize" hundreds of thousands of ethnic German families who were relocated

⁹ Until recently, gender was often neglected in the spate of work on European nationalism and nation building inspired by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York, 1991) although this seems to be changing. Quataert's *Staging Philanthropy* examines how female dynastic figures (especially their involvement in public ceremonies) helped to sustain a "patriotic public" before 1914. For discussions of how particular notions of (generally martial) masculinity helped to shape an understanding of citizenship in Germany before 1871, see Karen Hagemann, "Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre": *Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preussens* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2002); and Svenja Goltermann, *Körper der Nation: Habitusbildung und die Politik des Turnens, 1860–1890* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

en masse from the Soviet Union to German-occupied territories, by teaching metropolitan German patterns of household management to these resettled ethnic German housewives.

But although these domestic notions of Germanness led to unexpected and often vicious actions on the part of Nazi women in occupied Poland, for most of the period covered by this book, domesticity played a seemingly innocuous part in the articulation of German national identity. Before 1914, the most easily identifiable symbols and rituals of nationalism were objects such as the enormous monument to the Teutonic warrior Arminius (the *Hermannsdenkmal*) and the periodic festivities staged by German patriots around the monument, or the public celebrations and rituals surrounding the German monarchs.¹¹ Organized nationalism was more easily associated with aggressive (and largely masculine) right-wing organizations, such as the Pan-German League or the gymnasts' movement, than it was with housewives' associations and publications.¹² Nationalism was most blatant when it surfaced in national rituals and holidays, gatherings, and anniversaries that provoked surges of patriotism – “conventional carnivals of surplus emotion” – that participants saw as special time, outside the routines of ordinary life.¹³

By contrast, domesticity was one of the most banal aspects of Germanness. Although they may have been dull, this book argues that housekeeping and domesticity were nevertheless enshrined as a crucial site of national identity, especially juxtaposed against widely shared stereotypes about the private lives of people in other national communities. The comparisons that German writers made between their own households and those of foreigners were ubiquitous in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century household advice literature and were apparently useful in helping these writers (and their readers) to define what was specifically German in the private sphere. During wartime,

¹¹ For the drive to build the Arminius monument, see Charlotte Tacke, *Denkmal im sozialen Raum: Nationale Symbole in Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vendenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995); for the role that rituals celebrating dynastic figures played in building national identity and the “patriotic public,” see Quataert, *Staging Philanthropy*.

¹² See Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1866–1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984), and Goltermann, *Körper der Nation*, on the gymnasts' movement.

¹³ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 45.

moreover, the routines of housekeeping were thrown into the national spotlight, as housewives were told that their work and household habits were crucial to the nation's interests.

German national identity was successfully constructed because it was rooted not only in public, but also in private rituals and practices. Ordinary Germans used notions of gender, the household, and family to understand the "imagined" national community and their own identities. What sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called the *habitus* of social life – the routines, predispositions, and practices shared by particular groups – included assumptions and objects that helped to define German identity in ways that were sometimes only half-noticed by Germans. But such banal, domestic Germanness was the other side of the coin to the surges of patriotism provoked by a monarch's public appearance or a visit to the Arminius monument.

Bourdieu argued that one's own *habitus* often only becomes apparent when we are confronted with the norms and mentality of a different social group or culture, which provides a contrast to our own assumptions and habits. Certainly, domestic Germanness was most easily noticed when thrown into relief by exposure to the households and private life of other nations, as it was for Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick, the author of a humorous set of observations about private life in Germany published in 1908, *Home Life in Germany*. Mrs. Sidgwick was a German woman who had married an Englishman. Accustomed to German styles of domesticity, she had to adjust to English approaches to household management after her marriage, and she observed English families with wry amusement. When she first heard a discussion of "English housekeeping," she later wrote, "it was a new idea to me that any women in the world except the Germans kept house at all. If you live among Germans when you are young you adopt this view quite insensibly and without argument."¹⁴ Bourgeois English housewives, Sidgwick wrote, left much of their work to the servants and did not maintain really clean houses.

Although she spent most of her adult life in England, Sidgwick clearly admired and preferred the community of German bourgeois *Hausfrauen* to which her mother, aunts, and cousins belonged. Being part of such a community, and its routines of domesticity, helped

¹⁴ Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick, *Home Life in Germany* (New York: 1908), 113.

to shape Sidgwick's sense of her own Germanness. It was a community that was at least partly imagined, in the sense defined by Benedict Anderson, because most of its members would never meet each other, and yet thought of themselves as belonging to a common group.¹⁵ Reading Sidgwick's work (and earlier literature produced by nineteenth-century bourgeois German women) makes it clear that many considered themselves to be part of a community of German *Hausfrauen*, and that this community – and the template of household management that underlay the community – helped define the national identity of women such as Sidgwick's female relatives and acquaintances.

To Sidgwick, it was indisputable that there was a *German* style of housekeeping, and she seems to have defined this community fairly inclusively, as potentially encompassing all the housewives of her homeland. However, the model of domesticity that she looked back on with such longing was urban and bourgeois in its origins. During the period covered by this book, the home life that Sidgwick envisioned – with a wife who could devote most of her day to housework and child care, some hired domestic help, and a particular level of home décor and accoutrements – was simply beyond the reach of most rural households and the urban working classes. And yet bourgeois domesticity was still relatively successful as a basis for national identity, compared to some of the more overt and deliberately crafted symbols, such as Sedan Day, which were offered by German nationalists and rejected by broad segments of the German public. Unlike national markers or rituals associated with Prussia or the Protestant bourgeoisie, such as Sedan Day, the bourgeois ideal of domesticity was accessible and appealing across regional and confessional boundaries. Ultimately, it was so widely accepted that it could become the foundation for social policy.

¹⁵ My discussion of the imagined community of *Hausfrauen* is entirely indebted to Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, esp. pp. 25–6, 37–44, and 67–77. Anderson offers a working definition of such a community as “imagined because the members . . . will never know most of their fellow-members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” *Imagined Communities*, 6. Such imagined communities, Anderson argues, are a precondition for a sense of national identity and national community.

As I will show, particular approaches to housekeeping and domesticity helped to define the community of bourgeois German housewives. These standards and assumptions regarding household management shaped women's roles in their families and formed part of their individual self-identities. But these notions of domesticity were also incorporated into German public life. The patterns of daily life and private households I will discuss were constantly influenced by (and affected) public policies and developments in the workplace; public and private were interwoven and mutually dependent. The distinction between public and private was more prescriptive than descriptive.

In popular discussions of the German home during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, even the most private routines and habits were sometimes seen to have national significance. What could be more private, apparently, than a woman's decisions about how often to wash, what to sew for her children, or what to cook for her family? And what could be more a matter of personal choice? And yet, these decisions were also part of the process of class formation and moved to the heart of discussions of national character by the Imperial period, at the latest. After 1914, the German home was also increasingly the object of attempted interventions by women's organizations, industry, and the state, in the form of home economics education or attempts to change consumers' preferences.

Under the National Socialists, these attempts to influence household management expanded dramatically through a variety of guises and programs: reeducation camps for disorderly families; mandatory domestic service for young women; large-scale campaigns to reshape household consumption; and the introduction of the Mother Cross award, which was distributed to applicants who satisfied not only requirements for fertility, but who also met standards of "proper" housekeeping. Ultimately, these efforts to reshape German domesticity entered the arbitrary and violent campaigns to sort, classify, resettle, and resocialize hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans in occupied Poland after 1939.

This study examines the myth and the practices of cleanliness and housekeeping. It should be clear from the outset, however, that the Germans are not alone in cherishing a belief that they are "cleaner" than those from other cultures. "Cleanliness" plays a role in the construction

of national or ethnic identity and myths of national superiority in a variety of cultures, and certainly throughout the Western World and in European imperialism in the non-Western world. My focus is on development of “cleanliness” (along with such qualities as order, thrift, and time management) and the broader practices associated with domesticity in a single culture. Ultimately, this book traces how a specific style of housekeeping became bound up with German national identity, so much so that it was incorporated, apparently without debate, into the brutal and macabre policies implemented in occupied Poland during World War II.

But the fact that this book limits itself to an examination of domestic norms in a single culture does *not* mean that I am arguing that these values and practices did not exist elsewhere. Undoubtedly they did. This book does *not* seek to demonstrate that German homes were cozier, more orderly, or cleaner than their French, Russian, or British counterparts; such an assertion would be impossible to substantiate. This is a history of self-perception and identity, and of how identity was reflected in both daily life and social policy. Although many German housewives certainly internalized and enacted these standards, I have no reason to believe that a higher percentage did so in Germany than had done so in France, Denmark, or elsewhere.

I have tried, wherever possible, to incorporate evidence about the reactions of actual housewives to this ideal. Certainly, we can find evidence about the norms and goals embraced by some women regarding household management by examining the statements and programs of housewives’ organizations. But the aspirations or actual housekeeping of all German women, or even of the “typical” bourgeois German housewife (if she existed), are probably beyond historical reconstruction.

So, although many bourgeois Germans, such as Mrs. Sidgwick, were sure that their housekeeping surpassed that of their foreign counterparts, there is no evidence that they were correct. French women during the late nineteenth century no doubt also thought it a good idea to be very frugal. And similar to the Germans in Southwest Africa, British imperialists thought that they were cleaner than their colonial subjects, and this notion of cleanliness was integral to their racist descriptions of those they ruled over. Many of the attitudes and household standards that Mrs. Sidgwick valued were common among the middle classes in

all of the advanced industrial nations of this period, although particular domestic symbols or objects that were venerated (e.g., the German Christmas tree or the institution of British afternoon tea) might vary.

Thus, although bourgeois Germans were sometimes sure that their housekeeping was the best in the world, it most likely was not. And the fact that the German bourgeoisie was able to establish its domestic routines as a model for other classes to emulate was also not unique. The incorporation of the bourgeois model of home life (at least as an aspiration) into German national identity was one more example of the social and cultural accomplishments that David Blackbourne and Geoff Eley argued constituted the silent victories of the German bourgeoisie – the most successful where it was least noticed – in its contest for influence with Imperial Germany's preindustrial aristocratic elites.¹⁶ And as in other Western nations, nothing was more unobtrusive, more taken for granted, and yet less challenged than the fact that an orderly family life and household management were desirable.

Germany did not become a full-fledged parliamentary democracy before 1914, but Germany's bourgeoisie nevertheless achieved a level of economic, cultural, and social influence that paralleled the level enjoyed by their counterparts in other nations during the late nineteenth century. This group was responsible for such developments as the enactment of a German civil code that underwrote bourgeois economic interests; the creation of a host of voluntary organizations and public institutions that made up a large part of the public sphere; and the expansion and reform of higher education and professional certification systems. To this list we can add the construction of a widely shared understanding about the private sphere and what domestic life ought to consist of.

In fact, this bourgeois model had little influence over day-to-day life in aristocratic households (which were generally predicated on preserving claims to standing within that stratum), within working-class families (which generally could not afford to copy the bourgeoisie), or the peasantry. But this ideal of domesticity became what many working-class families at least aspired to realize, in part. And it was incorporated

¹⁶ David Blackbourne and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).