

Histories of Nationalism in Ireland and Germany: A Comparative Study from 1800 to 1932

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This study situates itself in the context of recent efforts to chart the emergence of the historical profession and the development of national historiographical traditions on a comparative basis. Noting that the literature on nationalism remains heavily biased towards paradigmatic European case-studies, Shane Nagle proposes to compare German narratives of national history with those written in the seemingly peripheral context of Ireland during the long 19th century. In doing so, he aims both to re-insert the latter into the mainstream of European nationalism, and to further relativise the uniqueness of the German experience, thereby helping to reveal a ‘general template’ of national history-writing (p. 3) during the period. Nagle’s work therefore constitutes a potentially very fruitful contribution to our understanding of nationalism as a fundamentally international phenomenon.

In his introduction, Nagle explains his intention to dissect the key texts of a group of 15 authors – eight of them Irish, seven of them German – written between the 1840s and the 1920s. He focuses upon the ways in which they addressed four major themes in the description of their respective nation’s history: its origins, its relationship to religion, to a particular territory, and to race and a constructed ‘other’. Emphasising that ‘[h]istorical inquiry and nationalism have always been intimately, even inseparably, linked’ (p. 2), he aims to illuminate a broader, ‘common rhetoric of the nationalist imaginary’ (p. 6). The selected authors, who include members of the Young Ireland movement, Gustav Freytag and Heinrich von Treitschke, were actively engaged in their country’s politics, such that their work can indeed be argued to have had a broader significance in the course of nationalism.

The comparison of Ireland and Germany certainly has much to recommend it. As Nagle points out, the two countries’ histories were characterised by the absence, or fragmentation of a national state, and profound confessional divisions. Both began the 19th century on a difficult footing: The Act of Union of 1801 formally incorporated Ireland within a new United Kingdom and removed its independent parliament, while the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806. The subsequent century witnessed the struggles, triumphs, and frustrations of a nationalist movement in both regions, passing through abortive attempts at democratic revolution in 1848, German unification in 1871, and ending with the collapse of the German *Kaiserreich* in 1918 and the creation of a divided Ireland in 1922. Throughout the period, Nagle argues, professional and

amateur historians in Ireland and Germany moulded historical narratives of the nation according to these changing circumstances, supporting their efforts to create a nation-state. In the process, certain key differences also emerged between them, not least of which the elaboration of a primarily Catholic narrative of national history in Ireland, and a primarily Protestant one in Germany.

As Nagle himself emphasises, however, comparative analysis must go beyond the identification of such similarities and differences. It must, he states, avoid the pitfall of 'juxtaposition rather than truly integrated and systematic comparison' (p. 10). Quoting Peter Baldwin, he points out that 'good comparative histories should give insights into each particular case that would have remained unrevealed had they been studied in isolation' (p. 10). In this regard, Nagle's work is somewhat disappointing. Whilst the text establishes clear parallels and divergences between Irish and German narratives of national history, it misses the opportunity to address and illuminate some of the fundamental questions which continue to preoccupy present-day scholars of European nationalism.

To a certain extent, this shortfall is related to the structure of the text itself, which is at times confusing. Each chapter generally comprises a section devoted to the development of history writing after 1900, but little sense is given of how the ideas used by the selected authors evolved over the course of the 19th century. Nagle makes clear his perfectly defensible decision to focus upon an analysis of the texts themselves, rather than their reception. But given the relationship which he establishes between the writing of national histories and the changing fortunes of nationalism as a whole, and given the role he attributes to the selected authors in 'fashioning the past' into narratives 'supporting the demands of the *modern* nation and nationalism' (p. 7), the lack of engagement with the political and social context is surprising. In general, Nagle assumes perhaps too high a degree of prior knowledge on the part of the reader – of both primary and secondary texts – to the extent that publication dates, as well as first names, are sometimes omitted in the text. An appendix provides information on the writers he engages with, but some detail in the text would have been desirable.

Chapter one focuses upon the ways in which writers reconstructed the historical origins of their nation, and Nagle notes that similar patterns were established in both contexts. The blueprints for these narratives, he argues, were drawn up by Ernst Moritz Arndt in Germany, and later the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s. The cycles of rise and decline that Irish and German authors associated with their nation's history can be rather neatly juxtaposed: from a Golden Age of Gaels and Germanic tribes during the early medieval era, to a period of decline in the Middle Ages, the unfulfilled promise of a rebirth in the wake of the Reformation, the religious divisions which it fostered, and a renewed onset of decline in the 17th and 18th centuries. In neither country had the *Kulturnation* which the writers described found solid support in the form of a unified state – this search for cultural continuity in the face of political fragmentation united historians in Ireland and Germany.

Within this framework, however, there existed considerable scope for variation. The 17th century, in particular, emerged as a pivotal but contested moment in each nation's history, during which religious divisions became most apparent. The Thirty Years' War in Central Europe fundamentally destabilised the Holy Roman Empire, which some had come to identify with the German nation. In the dominant narrative established by Heinrich von Sybel and Heinrich von Treitschke, however, the *Reich* was depicted as a decaying institution, tied to the interests of a cosmopolitan, Catholic dynasty – following the Peace of Westphalia, it would fall upon Prussia to take up the defence of the nation's interests. In Ireland, meanwhile, the period became a battleground between those who saw the mid-century Catholic Confederacy as a symbol of national resurgence, and those, like Thomas Davis, who celebrated the more inclusive, 'ecumenical' Patriot Parliament of 1689.

The search for unity in a fragmented past, Nagle concludes, characterised the approach taken in both contexts. But the topic might fruitfully have been expanded to consider its implications for the existing historiography. For instance, Nagle briefly suggests that the resort to a cultural conception of nationhood had stronger resonance in the Irish context, where no political institution comparable with the *Reich* could be established as a precursor to the writers' desired nation-state (p. 22). The point appears particularly valuable

given the traditional emphasis in the literature upon Germany as the epitome of the *Kulturnation*. The contested nature of that very *Reich* as a symbol of Germany, meanwhile, was intimately linked to the political and economic struggle between Prussia and Austria in the latter half of the 19th century, but this context is not addressed.

Chapter two investigates the role attributed to religion in the chosen authors' texts. The dominant narratives on this subject, Nagle explains, naturally revolved around the Reformation and its aftermath, and came to associate a particular confession with the interference of a foreign power. Those who confiscated land from the native Irish were thus closely identified with Protestantism, whilst the association of Catholicism with Rome was portrayed as a negative influence upon Germany. Here too, opinions were divided: between the strident Catholicism of D'Arcy McGee, for instance, and the more inclusive views of W. E. H. Lecky. In Germany too, Leopold von Ranke's understanding of the Reformation as an expression of the national spirit found opposition in Julius Ficker's promotion of the Catholic Holy Roman Empire as a defender of German interests.

This chapter also provides an illuminating account of early 20th-century attempts to explicitly 'de-confessionalise' the national past in the writings of the socialists Franz Mehring and James Connolly. This section demonstrates how class-based narratives were able to cut across traditional divisions (albeit on the basis of new socio-economic distinctions). Both authors, Nagle shows, attributed the Protestant-Catholic divide to a conflict over land during the 16th and 17th centuries, portraying England as the agent of feudal capitalism and accusing Catholic rulers in Germany of exploiting the masses.

Once again, more could have been done to contextualise the texts, however briefly, and to give a sense of the evolution of the ideas presented. Having demonstrated that W. E. H. Lecky and John Mitchel sought to reconcile divisions between Protestants and Catholics by emphasising their common Irish identity, for instance, Nagle suggests that the changing role of the church in 19th-century society then increasingly placed Catholicism at the centre of Irish nationhood. The details of this role, however, are neglected. The important observation that the association of Irish nationalism with Catholicism was only later, and progressively, emphasised, is only occasionally evoked, and is not demonstrated in the analysis of the texts themselves.

The following chapter takes up the theme of national territory. Nagle shows that similar distinctions emerged in Ireland and Germany between urban areas as centres of foreign, pernicious influences and the celebration of rural life as encapsulating a more 'authentic' national spirit. Dublin and Belfast, for instance, were seen as seats of both the 'old' and 'new' pales, whilst the German *völkisch* movement promoted a return to natural roots in the countryside. Nagle makes the interesting point that problematic border regions in both countries were dealt with by recasting them as the 'cockpits' of national history: Ulster and Prussia. The northern king, Hugh O'Neill, was thus portrayed as the last representative of a greater Irish kingship, and Frederick the Great was praised for turning a peripheral region of Central Europe into a powerhouse of German nationhood. In both countries the territorial rearrangements of the 1920s then heightened the importance of particular borders in the national imaginary: that between North and South in Ireland, and that with France after Germany's loss of Alsace-Lorraine.

Nagle also demonstrates that the picture was more complicated than such generalisations suggest. Urban life, for example, was described in favourable terms by Gustav Freytag, and Alice Stopford Green depicted medieval cities as symbols of the nation's past wealth. Borders, meanwhile, played a greater role in the German imaginary, as a constant source of threat to a country geographically situated in *Mitteleuropa*. In a brief excursus on empire, Nagle also makes the important observation that nationalist writers tended to ignore the diasporic dimension of Irish history, as the population's exodus was seen to reflect national weakness.

These complexities invite further reflection upon the evolution of the ideas that are presented. On one hand, the suggestion that some German writers' pride in the legacy of the Hanseatic city-states 'dovetailed neatly

with the bourgeois character of German nationalism' (p. 72) hints at the connection between middle-class liberalism and nationalism in the early 19th century, but Nagle nonetheless concludes that urban-rural and traditional-modern dichotomies remained predominant. On the other hand, he asserts that it was the later *völkisch* and Irish-Ireland movements which were most straightforwardly anti-modern. There is thus a tension between the attempt to identify a 'dominant' narrative of national history-writing across the period, and the sense that it changed over time.

Chapter four addresses the theme of race and the construction of the 'Other', and begins by making the important distinction between race and nation. Biological definitions of race, Nagle emphasises, were rarely at the forefront of nationalists' minds – Treitschke himself, indeed, understood that race was malleable, and subject to external influences. Rather, they conceived of the idea, along with that of the 'Volk', in terms of 'historically formed cultural communities' (p. 106). Once again, he explains, the attempt to define race was driven by a search for a strand of continuity in the nation's past. Nagle suggests that dissatisfaction with the type of state created in both contexts – after 1871 in Germany, and in 20th-century Ireland – then led to more exclusionary definitions of race, as promoted by the *völkisch* movement and as witnessed in the gaelicisation and de-anglicisation efforts of the Irish-Ireland movement.

As Nagle points out, the role attributed to race in definitions of nationhood raised problems of its own. Early members of Young Ireland, such as Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, for instance, emphasised a cultural understanding of Ireland's Celtic origins, being themselves unable to fully claim the heritage in 'biological' terms. The recognition that race was subject to change, meanwhile, required nationalist writers to emphasise the potential for a 'superior' bloodline to absorb another, whilst itself remaining 'uncontaminated'. Nagle therefore argues that the process of othering, the efforts of writers to describe one race primarily in opposition to another (the English or the French, for instance), was an effective means of obfuscating the internal inconsistencies in their definition.

The penultimate chapter is particularly compelling. Here, Nagle briefly addresses a number of connections between the writers and texts which he has chosen to study. Most importantly, perhaps, he demonstrates that Irish writers were conversant with the mainstream of European nationalism: Eoin MacNeill, for instance, used the work of German scholars of Celtic, and Standish O'Grady was much influenced by Jacob Grimm. Tracing these exchanges lends considerable support to the portrayal of nationalism as a thoroughly pan-European, international phenomenon, and certainly invites further exploration.

Throughout this study, then, Nagle successfully demonstrates that Irish and German narratives of national history shared certain assumptions and concerns, which go some way towards defining a 'general template' of nationalist thought. He also clearly illustrates the contested nature of these narratives, and the capacity for historians to 're-define certain myths and memories' (p. 157) in service of their political ambitions. To a great extent, these common concerns are encapsulated in the four major themes which structure the book: origins, religion, territory and race. These are, indeed, recognised tropes in the literature on nationalism. Beyond this, Nagle's close reading of the texts has the potential to illuminate a number of broader themes of interest to scholars of nationalism in Germany, in Ireland, and in general. He offers a number of revealing insights and some hints as to what these might be, but they are often buried in the text and could have been expanded upon.

One of the key similarities which Nagle highlights, for instance, is the emphasis upon cultural definitions of nationhood in both contexts. The much-debated distinction between 'civic' and 'ethnic' descriptions of nationalism seems to be of particular relevance, connecting as it does the four themes explored here, and might well have been further illuminated. Hugh Kearney, for instance, has proposed to view early Irish nationalism as an example of a 'civic' identity, inclusive of both Protestant and Catholic identities, which only progressively came to focus upon exclusionary cultural, or 'ethnic', categories as the 19th century wore on.⁽¹⁾ A parallel might be drawn in the German case, between nationalism's early connection with liberalism, and its slow turn to the right during the process of unification. This observation raises the broader question of the trajectory of nationalism, its change over time, which remains a little unclear throughout the

book.

A number of other themes emerge upon reading the text, which connect to the literature on nationalism that is cited in the bibliography. The discussion of territories, borderlands and regions, for example, and the manner in which these were reconciled with a broader sense of national unity, were clearly connected to the concrete political questions with which nationalists were confronted. To take one example, Nagle notes that Treitschke ‘slipped into the present tense’ (p. 89) when confronting the issue of particularism in Germany, but does not mention the ongoing conflict between the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in German nationalism – the federal legacy of the Holy Roman Empire, which has recently been explored in the historiography.⁽²⁾ A comparison seems plausible with the work of Alice Stopford Green, which, as is shown on p. 95, presented the Gaelic tradition of government as a model for federalism in the face of what was perceived as British centralisation.

Finally, more discussion might have been devoted to the ways in which these texts illuminate the nature of the connection between history-writing and nationalism, which Nagle evokes in his introduction and briefly returns to in the conclusion. He states that ‘[t]he claims made within the German tradition to scholarly supremacy [...] were often not much more than that’ (p. 152), particularly given their political engagement, but the text makes little mention of the writers’ actual political influence, or of the conception of history with which they operated. A brief mention of Standish O’Grady’s belief in the role of creativity in the historian’s craft (p. 125) might have introduced a comparison with the ideas put forward by Georg Iggers, who argued for a peculiarly ‘German conception of history’.⁽³⁾ That academics, lawyers and journalists across Europe modified the facts of their nation’s past invites further inquiry into the degree to which they understood historical scholarship in positivistic terms, and into their belief in the transcendent reality of the nation, which they felt a duty to materialise.

This study nevertheless unpacks some of the important texts in the national historiographical traditions of Ireland and Germany, and reveals interesting similarities and differences between them. As such, it contributes to the reconstruction of 19th-century nationalism as an international phenomenon. It also constitutes a useful starting point for reflections on other continuing debates in the historiography of nationalism, which, however, the reader will have to undertake independently.

Notes

1. H. Kearney, *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York, NY, 2007), pp. 33–56. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Federalism in Germany: Past, Present and Future*, ed. M. Umbach (Basingstoke, 2002). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT, 1983). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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