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NATIONAL CIVIL RELIGION IN THE GERMAN EMPIRE (1871-1918)

A b s t r a c t. The article draws on the argument presented by Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1996), and specifically on the thesis that nationalism can be also approached as a religious phenomenon- with its distinctive mythology, dogmas, “saints,” and ritual behavior; they term such ideological-ritual complex “national civil religion.” Using this heuristic tool, I analyze the quasi-religious content of German national ideology dominant in the *Kaiserreich* (1871-1918) by discussing three layers of imagery that can be distinguished in this ideological system: appropriated history as well as Christian-Biblical and mythological-folkloric components.

Key words: Germany; *Kaiserreich*; nationalism; national civil religion; invented traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Marvin and Ingle argue that nationalism mirrors the structure of other ideological-ritual systems that are traditionally labeled as “religious” because it possesses its founding myths, “holy people,” symbols, and rituals (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 767). Similarly, the “national civil religion” that accompanied the sociohistorical process of emergence of modern German nationhood in the course of the nineteenth century became the principal depository of symbols and rituals on which political and cultural elites drew in order to unite around their vision of German nationhood the inhabitants of the territories that became part of the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) after 1871. In this

article, I analyze this ideological complex, focusing primarily on quasi-religious aspects of the German national imagery and symbolism.

1. THE SECOND GERMAN REICH – AN “UNFINISHED STATE”

The development of national civil religion in the modern German empire was conditioned by at least two constitutive features of the *Kaiserreich*. First, the empire was, as Banac put it, a “matrix state” (1984, 22) – the one composed of the dominant German nationality in its core, and of particular nationalisms (Polish, Danish, French, Dutch) on the periphery. This meant that German ruling elites permanently had to make choices concerning ethnic minorities, such as autonomy vs. control, freedom vs. repression, imposition of national language vs. tolerance of local vernaculars, etc. (Smith 1995, 10). Second, by accepting and promoting the political existence of several smaller states under the domination of Prussia, Bismarck patched together various, culturally and politically relatively heterogeneous German-speaking lands into an empire without being able, however, to create foundations for an overarching “German” identity. Consequently, the *Kaiserreich*, although politically unified, was still an “unfinished nation” (Schieder 1992) – a federation composed of several kingdoms, principalities, dukedoms, and free cities – marked by a deep confessional rift that translated into particular loyalties, either to Protestant Prussia or to Catholic Bavaria, not to mention the inveterate attachment to local homelands (*Heimat*). The deep-seated cultural division between Protestants and Catholics was particularly important, and it became the leading issue during the particularly intensive phase of the nation-making process that began after the political unification in 1871, known as the *Kulturkampf*, when the Catholic Church was declared an „enemy of the state” and confronted with a series of discriminating legislative acts.

2. IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL CIVIL RELIGION IN IMPERIAL GERMANY

2.1. Myths of Origin

Arguably, the most significant “funding myths” of Imperial Germany were: the appropriated (and hence mythologized) history of the medieval Ottonian

Empire, regarded as the predecessor of the *Kaiserreich*,¹ and the story of the Battle of Sedan (1871). While the “Ottonian myth” is replete with religious components, significantly redefined in the context of the *Kulturkampf*, the story of the Battle of Sedan refers to a modern military event that was subsequently recounted in a semi-religious idiom (comp. Piwowarczyk 2013).

2.1.1. The Ottonian Myth

The Ottonian empire, as well as the eastward expansion of the Teutonic Order and of the Hanseatic League, received particular attention of German historiographers who were engaged in the “cultural phase” of the nation-building process during the nineteenth century (comp. Hroch 2000, 61f.). The academic interest in the medieval period of German history was nonetheless frequently characterized by a vivid ideological polemic, especially during the *Kulturkampf*. On the one hand, unified Germany that emerged after 1871 was discursively styled into the inheritor of the Ottonian political tradition. On the other, however, the period before the Reformation, dominated by Rome and its “corrupt popes,” was frequently regarded as the time when the German people was being drained of its vital creativity (Smith 1995, 31). Such anti-thetic conceptions about the Middle Ages reflected the “unfinished” character of imperial Germany – namely the fact that the *Kaiserreich* was a product of “negotiated consent” or the political compromise between the landed aristocracy – with its monarchic tradition – and the industrial bourgeoisie that supported the nationalist ideology designed and promoted by the educated middle class or *Bildungsbürgertum* (Eley 1991). In the second half of the nineteenth century, it was not the aristocratic elite, however, but bourgeoisie that increasingly began to occupy leading positions in the civil society, including the control over the state apparatus with its mechanisms of social control and disciplining. Consequently, “(it) was (also) the latter,” says H.W. Smith – that is the middle class – “that set the tone of national debate” (1995, 12). The new German empire as imagined by nationally-minded historians, such as Heinrich von Treitschke, should therefore no longer be a “mixed empire” (*Mischreich*) – like e.g. Catholic Austria-Hungary, where aristocratic absolutism was “without a doubt a natural form of government” – but rather a polity unified territorially based on a consensus on (Protestant) va-

¹ The term “Ottonian Empire” refers here to the period of the rule of the Ottonian dynasty (919-1024), named after its first emperor, Otton I the Great (912-973). The Ottonian rulers are the first dynasty of the Holy Roman Empire and the successors of the Frankish Carolingian dynasty and Charlemagne.

lues (von Treitschke 1897, 1-18). The “myth of Sedan” reflected and expressed those political and cultural ambitions.

2.1.2. The Myth of Sedan

The “myth of Sedan” refers to the Battle of Sedan – the conclusive military event during the Franco-Prussian War. It was fought on September 1, 1870 and resulted in a complete victory of the Prussian-led coalition, including the capture of Emperor Napoleon III and 103,000 of his troops on the next day – the triumph that was later celebrated in the *Kaiserreich* as an unofficial national holiday, the “Sedan Day” (*Sedantag*). The proclamation of the German Empire was subsequently interpreted by the historiographers of that period as a logical consequence of the Sedan victory, and the battle itself took precedence over other military engagements of the fourteen-month-lasting war which were thus blended into one Combat of mythical proportions (Lorenzen 2006, 144).

There exist a number of published first-hand accounts of that battle which could be regarded as particular “versions” of the Sedan myth. Most of them are regimental histories or memoirs of aristocratic officers. Still, several of those narratives were authored by ordinary soldiers of humbler social background, such as Bernhard Bösemann, Emil Morgenroth, or Max Riemschneider.² Far more influential than those private memoirs, however – because of the social standing of the author, the literary value of his work, and the broader perspective given to the described events – was the account written by Carl Bleibtreu (1859–1928), the father of the German war reportage.³ Symbolically the most suggestive is the final chapter in which Bleibtreu presents an apocalyptic, indeed hellish picture of a muddy battlefield where both the victors and the defeated wade knee-deep in the bloody gore amidst the bodies of the fallen, and where the stench of the decomposing cadavers

² Theodor FONTANE. *Der Krieg gegen Frankreich, 1870-1871*. Bd 1-3 (2003), 2008, 2009 [1873]. Bad Langensalza: Rockstuhl; Max RIEMSCHEIDER. *Ein Erfurter im Deutsch-Französischen Krieg 1870/71* (2005). Bad Langensalza: Rockstuhl; Thomas MÜLLER (Hrsg.). *Erlebnisse eines Thüringers im Krieg gegen Frankreich 1870/71* (2006). Bad Langensalza: Rockstuhl; Emil MORGENROTH. *Sein schwerster Gang! Im Deutsch-Französischen Krieg 1870-71* (2010) [1900]. Bad Langensalza: Rockstuhl. August NIEMANN. *Das 6. Thüringische Infanterie-Regiment No. 95 im Feldzuge gegen Frankreich 1870-1871* (1875). Gotha: E.F. Thienemann.

³ Originally published in 1910, as part of the monumental work of that author devoted to the Franco-Prussian War, the book was reprinted in 2010, in the 19-volume edition of Bleibtreu’s oeuvre (Carl BLEIBTREU. *Schlachten und Belagerungen im Deutsch-Französischen Krieg [1870-1871]: Gesamtausgabe in 19 Bänden* (2006). Langensalza: Rockstuhl).

makes the air toxic. Out of the “torn-apart souls” of the French prisoners of war, Bleibtreu says, come the “bestial drunkenness and vulgarity,” as if they were destined for eternal damnation, which sharply contrasts with the “bourgeois modesty and cleanness” of the Prussian soldiers. “With homely prudence and orderliness,” he continues, they “are tidying their uniforms and attaching missing buttons to their jackets, as if no “heroic drama” had ever taken place. The blood-soaked battlefield really exists, nonetheless, and it seems to cry: “Where is the French army? And the echo of the nearby forest mocks the question – where?” which only enhances the feeling of deadly emptiness, hopelessness, and desperation. “The answer is given by the dying voice which rattles that the entire power of France sank into the insatiable abyss, wiped away by the unstoppable wave of (Prussian) arms.” In the end, “the sun submerged in the darkness,” and the “heavens hear the hymn rising from the bloody battlefield: ‘A mighty fortress is our God’” (Bleibtreu 2010, 180-185).

The “myth of Sedan” can be analytically approached in terms of a group-sustaining “ritual blood sacrifice.” In order to give rise to enduring unity within the group, Marvin and Ingle argue, the war – idealized as a blood sacrifice – must satisfy a number of conditions. In the first place, it must be big enough and/or virtually enhanced by the media, so that it can be imagined as a conflict that touches, or seems to touch, every member of the group. Secondly, the sacrifice must be willing and “the victimage must be unanimous” – otherwise it will be discursively construed as such by emphasizing that the soldiers “gave” or “sacrificed” their lives. Thirdly, the conflict must be imagined as posing a genuine risk to the group’s survival, as the community faces its sworn enemy that has “always” intended to annihilate it – its *Erbfeind* (“hereditary enemy”). Finally, the sacrifice must be “consummated” – that is, its outcome is definitive and universal or extending beyond the present time and space; as such, it brings a redefinition of history and of the group’s territory – a new beginning (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 171-176).

A clear and definitive outcome of a battle is, therefore, one of several conditions that symbolically transform it into a group-making blood sacrifice of nearly cosmic proportions. Moreover, this mythologized event marks new space and time for the victorious side – it is, in fact, the beginning, or a new phase of the group’s history. In military and political terms, the battle of Sedan was such complete victory: the army of Prussia’s “hereditary enemy” was destroyed and French imperial ambitions were obliterated. As Bleibtreu put it, “the old legend of the imperial eagle dissolved in the bluish mist” (2010, 183). More importantly, Bleibtreu’s depiction of the battle in quasi-religious terms as a final Armageddon, with clearly defined groups of the “damned” and of the “saved,” points

to the universal, time- and space-redefining meaning of that event. “History begins from this moment; territorial borders are re-created or reaffirmed; time and space are consecrated anew, as if for the first time” (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 776). Indeed, the chaos of the blood-soaked battlefield at Sedan was the starting point for the unified German Empire that could now rise unhindered after the French imperial eagle had been downed. It was also the beginning of history for one “German” (not just “Prussian”) nation, although the “Germanness” still had to be specified and bureaucratically enforced. “Solve my enigma; construe a decent world order,” Bleibtreu says. And indeed, in the very final paragraph, he sketches this “decent world order” by means of a rhetorical inversion of the military debacle into a moral victory. Specifically, he quotes the Prussian Crown Prince who said to the captured officer of a French cuirassier regiment: “In the struggle between Germans and Frenchmen, it is no shame to lose.” Bleibtreu concludes by presenting an image of a new, harmonious cosmos that emerged from the chaos of the battlefield: “Shouldn’t we, two brave peoples, rather shake our hands and bury the battleaxe where our fallen comrades are rotting?” (2010, 185).

2.2. National “Saints”

Another important constituent of any national civil religion is a host of idealized national heroes. Here I present two such personalities of the German past – Queen Louise of Prussia and Chancellor Otto Bismarck – who represented the “lowest” and the “highest” point in the history of the emerging German nation, respectively, and who were to function in the emerging collective consciousness as the “mother” and the “father” archetypes.

Queen Louise, or Luisa Augusta Wilhelmina Amalie (1776–1810), was not a Prussian by birth; in fact, she was born to the ruling family of a small duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz.⁴ In 1793, Louise married the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm and, after his ascension to the throne, she became Queen of Prussia in 1797. Interestingly, in spite of her aristocratic upbringing, Louise’s lifestyle and interests were rather compatible with those of the bourgeois middle class – the group which shaped the German national consciousness in the course of the nineteenth century, and which ultimately forged and promoted Louise’s legend. Thus, she was being praised for her “pure common sense” as well as for the fact that she raised her children herself, in accordance with liberal pedagogical principles proposed by Jean

⁴ Grand duchy Mecklenburg-Strelitz existed between 1701 and 1918, in what is today north-east Germany.

Jacques Rousseau (Demandt 2003, 283f.). It should not be surprising, therefore, that she was being viewed through the prism of such contemporary feminine attributes as prettiness, maternal kindness, and wifely virtues, and – even in her lifetime – celebrated by the poet August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) as the “queen of our hearts” and the “mother our land” (Fesser 2012, 82). The popular esteem toward the queen only increased during the lowest ebb in the Prussian history – the crisis of the state after the military debacle inflicted by Napoleon’s troops in 1806. Her unsuccessful meeting with Napoleon in Tilsit, in July 1807, in order to renegotiate the terms of the humiliating peace conditions imposed on Prussia, only added new content to Louise’s growing legend as it was often interpreted in terms of the “Belle and the Beast” motif (cf. Bömelburg 2011, 108-122).

The idealization of Queen Louise that began already during her lifetime was a function of the growing political importance of the middle class. On the one hand, the “bourgeois” image projected by the Prussian royal family, especially by the queen, certainly crossed over the established boundaries of social distinctions and appealed to the tastes of the *Bildungsbürgertum* that were shaped by the values and domestic aesthetics of Biedermeier, thus closing symbolically the gap of status between the aristocracy and the “third estate.” On the other hand, however, it was the middle class that accepted and reinterpreted that image into an “idealized representation of itself” (Schorn-Schütte 2003, 88). In the *Kaiserreich*, which provided the territorial framework and the political context for the expansion of national ideology, Louise’s legend was given a quasi-religious dimension: this Protestant queen was frequently doubled “Prussian Madonna” and thus given the reverence that resembled Catholic Marian veneration. The imperial state apparatus supported this cult and promoted it through various forms of public ritual. In 1886, for instance, the administration of schools in the Prussian provinces issued a regulation according to which Queen Louise’s birthday, March 10, should be celebrated in all private and public educational establishments for girls in the form of special commemorative events. On these occasions, history teachers “should present the biography of that illustrious woman who, in the time of suffering, worked so generously for the good of the nation, and thus gave a beautiful example to all following generations” (Drewes 1999, 164).

While Queen Louise was regarded as the “mother of the land,” Otto Bismarck, the architect of unification, was increasingly presented by nationalist circles as “the father” of the nation, particularly after his forced retirement from political life in 1890. Indeed, he was an outstanding figure of almost superhuman talent and energy, and his famous statement: “We Germans are

afraid only of God and besides of nobody else in the world” (*Wir Deutsche fürchten Gott, aber sonst nichts auf der Welt*) conveys sufficiently well his political stature and ambitions. Bismarck’s impact on German politics of that period was enormous. During his “iron” chancellorship (1871-1890), the citizens of the German empire “interiorized the idea of a strong and infinitely wise man at the head of the state,” Max Weber wrote, who, however, created “a nation without any political formation and without any identifiable inner center of gravity. [...] Nowhere else in the world unconditional admiration for the personality of a politician prompted a proud nation to abandon its own objective judgments” (Weber 1988, 311; Barth 2011, 110).

The unified German state that Bismarck masterminded, indeed the entire European political order that emerged after 1871, were therefore – as Michael Stürmer accurately put it – works of that “sorcerer’s apprentice.” It means specifically that Bismarck unleashed forces – political, economic, ideological – that he could only barely control; they did lead to the formation of the unified German political space, but at the same time they set the German empire on a course that eventually led to its self-destruction (Stürmer 2000, xivf.). Still, after his retirement and, especially, after his decease (1898), Bismarck began to be glorified as a “saint” of the German national civil religion. Thus, after his death an organization of students presented a project of *Bismarcktürme* (“Bismarck’s Towers”) – simple blocks of stone (which could be even interpreted as phallic or “fatherly” representations) that were to be bearing the Chancellor’s coat of arms or a sentence from one of his speeches, with votive fire burning on top of them – “like in the time of the ancient Saxons and Normans” (Weißmann 2007, 80). Moreover – unlike Spaniards who in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries named their newly conquered territories after Catholic saints – grateful Germans used Bismarck’s name to mark the nodal points of their expanding colonial space, such as “Bismarck Archipelago” in Melanesia, “Bismarckburg” in Togo and German East Africa (today Tanzania), or “Bismarck Mountains” in present-day Namibia.

2.3. “Sacred” National Symbols

The national civil religion also makes use of certain symbols of statehood, such as the flag, the coat of arms, monuments, visual representations of the nation, insignia, and hymns. While it is true that, as Marvin and Ingle say, the national flag “is treated with an awe and deference that marks it as the sacred object of the religion of patriotism,” it not always “represents the sacrificed bodies of its devotees just as the cross, the sacred object of Chris-

tianity, represents the body sacrificed to a Christian god” (1996, 770). Rather, the national flag – whose appearance in the civilian context coincided with the emergence of nationalist movements and modern nation-states (most notably France and the USA) in the late 18th century – is a “binary phoneme” in the political discourse of nationalism as it denotes not only what the nation is but also what it is not – ethnically, politically, and in terms of class distinctions. In other words, the flag is a sign in the official national “language” of the elite rather than the “dialect” of the masses.⁵ Furthermore, as the official meaning of the flag expresses existing relations power, it is also subject to reinterpretation in accordance with shifting configurations of the field of power. The composition “black-red-white” as the colors of a Pan-German flag, for instance, was proposed as early as 1848 – that is, when the German Confederation, including Prussia and Austria, was still alive – and it was then interpreted as the combination of the Prussian black-white and the Austrian red-white-red flags. Later, in 1866, after the military debacle of Austria (inflicted by Prussia) and its exclusion from the newly created North German Confederation, it was suggested that the black-red-white flag is actually a synthesis of the Prussian (black-white) and of the Hanseatic (red-white) colors.⁶ Bismarck himself argued, in accordance with his political vision of Germany, that the newly adopted flag, which eventually became the official flag of the *Kaiserreich*, resulted from the combination of the Prussian and the Brandenburgian flags, and as such it refers to the dynastic history of the ruling House of Hohenzollern, in particular to the person of Kaiser Wilhelm I who insisted on the Prussian domination in the Confederation (Weißman 2007, 74). Finally, not all flag designs make a direct reference to the blood of national heroes, as Marvin and Ingle argue. The national flag should be rather viewed as the encoded past, present, and future of a national polity – its icon and program

⁵ The German Confederation – the political entity that emerged after the Congress of Vienna and included Prussia, Austria and several German states – used the black-red-gold standard, adopted after the revolutionary events of 1846-1848. However, as Bismarck consequently vied for a “small Germany” option that excluded Catholic Austria, he argued in 1850 before the Union Parliament in Erfurt – which was to prepare the „small German” solution – that the “black-red-gold flag should never be the colors of the unified German state because it has been for the last two years the sign of insurgency and barricades” (Weißmann 2007, 74). See also Bourdieu 1991, 44f.

⁶ The North German Confederation was never meant to be a nation-state but rather a transitional polity. As such, it never had “national colors” but only a black-red-white commercial and war flags. Three Hanseatic cities: Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen, formed parts of the North-German Confederation, and later – as free cities – became components of the *Kaiserreich*.

at the same time. As such, it is the “eye” of the almighty providence of the state that demands deference and “correct political” (and hence “civil”) behavior – the one that is in conformity with the interests of the state, or rather its ruling elite.

The same is valid for the national emblem or the coat of arms. As B. Anderson observed, in the early modern European polities the coats of arms visualized the feudal subordination of particular territories to the sovereign in the context of centralization of royal power and absolutism (Anderson 1991, 20), or – like in the case of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795) – expressed the relation of homology of its constitutive parts. On the other hand, the emblems of modern nation-states that began to emerge in the course of the nineteenth century either “appropriated” certain aspects of national history or illustrated how the nation (its dominant class) defined itself in the context of the dominant socio-political narrative, and/or how it projected itself into the future. The emblem of the North German Confederation, for instance, showed the black-red-white shield supported by two mythical wild men, taken from the Prussian coat of arms, and the Prussian crown above it (Fig. 1).

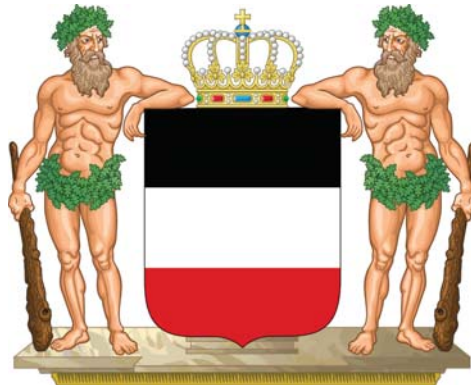


Fig. 1. Emblem of the North-German Confederation, 1867-1870 (Source: Internet)

“Although this emblem was not entirely expedient as the sign of a confederation of states,” Weißmann says, “it certainly expressed the factual relations of power” (Weißmann 2007, 75). In other words, the emblem was like Prussia’s watchful eye – represented by the jovial and yet threatening two “wild men” (each holding a heavy club) – that was gazing at other, politically subordinated polities and their citizens. Interpretations of the meaning of the “wild man” motif vary widely. While Yamamoto argues that the “wild men” symbolize the frontier of civilization that is frequented by people from social

interstices, such as hermits, hunters, criminals and other “freelancers,” Görden points to the dynamic aspect of that symbol – namely, the subjugation of wilderness by expanding urban societies (Yamamoto 2000, 150f.; Görden 1993). The “subjugation of wilderness” certainly corresponds to the case of Prussia that continued the political and military tradition of the Teutonic Knights who, in the course of the thirteenth century, conquered the territory of Baltic Prussians, then considered a frontier of Christianity, and converted East European “wilderness” into urbanized and cultivated land. Additionally, Thiemer-Sachse, in her analysis of the motif of “wild man” in Spanish America, points to an interesting analogy between the iconographic representations of that pre-Christian mythological motif and the Christian figure of Saint Christopher (2009, 87 and 90). After the unification of Germany under the aegis of Prussia, the “wild men” were also included into the coat of arms of the newly created *Reich*. Its main component, however, was the black, Prussian eagle with the black-white checkerboard shield on the breast (*Hohenzollern Schach*), and the medieval Ottonian crown over its head (Fig. 2). In this way, Prussia’s landowning class, the Junkers – who also constituted the core of the officer corps – symbolically affirmed its political domination in the *Kaiserreich* and legitimized its rule by appropriating the tradition of the Holy Roman Empire and of the Ottonian dynasty.



Fig. 2. Coat of Arms of the German Empire, 1871-1918 (Source: Internet)

New symbols, introduced after 1871, were more direct iconographic representations of the German nation. One of them was the Archangel Michael – the patron of the medieval Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. In 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm II himself drafted an image of the Archangel that was then painted by Hermann Knackfuß (1848–1915) and published – in the time of German colonial expansion in China – under the intriguing title “Yellow Danger” (*Gelbe Gefahr*). The picture shows Archangel Michael with a fiery sword as the leader of other European nations invariably represented by female figures, such as Marianne, Britannia, Germania and Italia. The archangel is pointing at Buddha – who appears at a distance in a ring of fire – with a warning: “Europeans, defend your holiest treasures!” (Fig. 3). The image of the Archangel Michael underwent a gradual “secularization” in the following decade, however; on the monument of the Battle of Nations near Leipzig, for instance, this originally Catholic saint has been rendered as an allegory of the Teutonic Fury (*furor teutonicus*).



Fig. 3. “Yellow Danger,” by Hermann Knackfuß, 1895 (Source: Internet)

Another contemporary visualization of the German nation was “Germania,” presented as a young woman wielding a sword, wearing either a coronet of oak leaves (oak being yet another German symbol) or the medieval imperial crown, and holding a shield with the black *Reichsadler*. The figure was also interpreted in “Old-Germanic” terms, namely as Valkyrie – the female warrior of Germanic mythology (Weißmann 2007, 82). The image of Germania,

whose early version appeared on the Niederwald Monument,⁷ eventually became a permanent element on banknotes and coins, thus functioning as an informal national emblem.

The cultural phenomenon of visualizing male-dominated nations through female figures has been variously interpreted in relevant literature. Landes (2001), for instance, taking as the case in point *Marianne la République* promoted during the French Revolution, views it as an attempt to “sexualize” the nation in order to make it both attractive to males and symbolically appealing to women. Moreover, like in the case of Michael the Archangel, Marianne – who brings to mind the figure of Saint Joan of Arc (*La Pucelle d’Orléans*) – is also an example of secularization of religious symbols for national purposes. During the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* certain German poets even styled themselves as manly Teutonic knights who rescue young women “from the dark madness of the monastery” (Smith 1995, 36). In any case, the female Germania who displays a “masculine” attribute of power – the sword – is a feminized representation of national community and, as such, an inverted mirror image of the “male nation.”

Yet another group of German national symbols constitute abstract signs and insignia – one the most important of them being the Iron Cross. Established in 1813 by the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III, the black cross with a white lining evokes the emblem of the Teutonic Knights who conducted their crusade against “wild” and “pagan” Baltic Prussians on the frontier of the West European civilization. Friedrich Wilhelm III instituted this order during the “crusade” against Napoleon, giving it a democratic character: it was to be awarded for extraordinary military deeds both to officers and ordinary soldiers – without considering class distinctions. During the World War I, the iron cross began to be utilized as the recognition mark on aircraft and vehicles; in fact, it is being used in this function by the German military even today, which shows its remarkable continuity (Weißmann 2007, 86). More importantly, the Iron Cross is a multi-layered symbol that contains all important semantic elements that were associated with the idea of German statehood at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century: the Christian medieval tradition, the Hohenzollern monarchic rule, the Prussian militarism, the opposition against the French “hereditary enemy,” and the democratic trappings of the political system of imperial Germany.

⁷ The Niederwald Monument, located near Bielefeld, commemorates the unification of German lands in 1871.

The antithetic fusion of monarchic and national-democratic principles that characterized the *Kaiserreich* as a polity can be also found in the sacralized content of the state hymn. The semi-official anthem of Germany during that period was the “Imperial Hymn” (*Kaiserhymn*) – a slightly modified version of the Prussian “Royal Hymn” – played and sung, in the first place, on the occasion of the emperor’s birthday.⁸ The lyrics extolled the Emperor as a “victorious conqueror,” the “lord of the land,” and “the beloved of the people” (*Liebling des Volkes*). The symbolism is almost religious and compares, for example, with Psalm 68: “God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered. [...] Sing to God, sing praises to his name. [...] His name is the Lord. [...] Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”⁹

CONCLUSION

One can distinguish three main layers of symbolism in the “civil religion” of German nationalism – historical, Christian-Biblical, and mythological-folkloric. The historical content is recognizable in references to the medieval Ottonian empire, the eastward expansion of the Teutonic Knights, and in the discussion about the meaning of national colors held during the last decade before the creation of the unified German nation-state, and specifically – “red-white” symbolizes Catholic Austria or Protestant Brandenburg. The Christian-Biblical contribution is the most comprehensive and includes the Iron Cross – the first truly “national” military decoration – the discursive styling of Queen Louise into Catholic Madonna; the figure of the Archangel Michael as the main patron saint of Germany; the textual parallels between the *Kaiserhymn* and Psalm 68; and the apocalyptic tone of the very influential description of the Battle of Sedan provided by Carl Bleibtreu who presented it both as the decisive combat between Good (German) and Evil (French), and as the beginning of the New Era for the German nation initia-

⁸ Since 1795, it had been performed to the melody of the British “God save the king,” which is not surprising if one considers both the symbolic preponderance of the *Pax Britannica* and later, since 1858, the dynastic connections between the House of Hohenzollern and the British line of the House of Hannover: the consort of the first ruler of the unified German Empire, Wilhelm I, and the mother of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Princess Royal Victoria (1840-1901), was the oldest daughter of the British Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

⁹ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1985), 879-881.

ted with the foundation of the unified state. Finally, the mythical-folkloric layer constitute the visual motif of female “Germania,” frequently interpreted as an Old-Germanic *Valkyrie*; the “Bismarck Towers” that were intended to be imitations of ancient Germanic altars with votive fire; and the figure of “wild men” in the official Prussian coat of arms. In the course of the nineteenth century, all these symbols and symbolical references had been woven into an appealing and effective instrument of political mobilization in German-speaking lands.

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QUASI-RELIGIJNE ELEMENTY W NACJONALIZME NIEMIECKIM
OKRESU CESARSTWA (1871-1918)

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Biorąc jako punkt wyjścia tezę przedłożoną przez Carolyn Marvin i Davida Ingle (1996), a mianowicie, że nacjonalizm może być również analizowany jako system religijny – zawierający określoną mitologię, „dogmaty”, postacie wyidealizowanych bohaterów narodowych („świętych”) oraz zachowania o charakterze rytualnym – autor niniejszego tekstu poddaje analizie interpretywnej quasi-religijne aspekty nacjonalizmu niemieckiego okresu Cesarstwa (1871-1918). Analiza ta prowadzi do wyróżnienia trzech warstw obrazowania o charakterze religijnym: zmitologizowana historia, symbolizm biblijno-chrześcijański oraz komponenty mitologiczno-folklorystyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: Niemcy; Cesarstwo Niemieckie; nacjonalizm; mitologizacja historii.