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Berard Reviews: The Nationalization of the Masses

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Book Reviewed: <u>The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich</u> George Mosse Howard Fertig, Publisher 1975	
Rating:	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

George Mosse had the sort of career that the history profession doesn't really allow for today. No matter how brilliant an individual historian might be, the way the profession is now structured does not allow for the kind of pivots Mosse pulled. Starting as a specialist in the Reformation, Mosse left the early modern period behind mid-career and became one of the leading historians of fascism. There's something to be said for the way we do things now. The kind of granular analysis you see in contemporary historians of fascism, like Johann Chapoutot, is in part the product of the sort of hyper-specialization you didn't have in Mosse's day. But earlier methods had their advantages, too, and not just in terms of career flexibility.

What got the German people, who had lived for centuries in many separate domains and were separated along religious lines, on board with the unified German nation-state, indeed, many of them so amped for a united Germany that they went overboard and left the traditional nation-state form behind to create an apocalyptic all-conquering German empire? This is the question Mosse wrestles with in several books, including "The Crisis of the German Ideology" and "The Nationalization of the

Masses.” In the former volume, he dealt with the content of the “volkish” ideology that washed over Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which unified a critical mass of the German people behind the idea of themselves as a “volk,” a race with a unique and all-important destiny. In the book under discussion here, Mosse discusses the forms that this nationalization took, what allowed for all of these people to take hold of nationality and make it meaningful to their lives.

Later scholars of nationality, like Benedict Anderson, would put a lot of emphasis on what we today call “the discourse” — back then, mostly newspapers — for its role in causing a national identity to gel. “Nationalization of the Masses” makes the interesting point that if you want to cement a given national identity as transcending time — as the nationalists of Germany did — newspapers are almost an impediment, being a reminder of the transitoriness of things. Early German nationalists, for their part, preferred to instill national feeling in the masses through architecture, ritual, and popular participation in a nationalist liturgy — a full-fledged secular religion, in Mosse’s telling.

Mosse goes on to describe the various efforts to create a national secular religion of German-ness. Until the Third Reich got a hold of it, this was mostly an unofficial project mounted by nationalism-enthusiasts. The Second Reich, under Bismarck and the Kaisers, was leery of some of the nationalistic extremes and popular enthusiasms of the movements involved, and most of these people were anti-republican and so wanted nothing to do with the Weimar Republic. So it was mostly poets, philosophers, educators, and the sort of people who like getting clubs together who formed this national religion. As such, it formed something of a hodgepodge. Classicism was popular among German nationalists, especially in architecture — lots of big white buildings with columns, etc. So, too, was romanticism, which you’d figure would operate at cross-purposes to classicism, but the kitschy eclecticism of the small minds of nationalism “made it work.” You see much the same dynamic on the right today, with its (mis)appropriation of both classical and medieval styles. Hitler, for his part, was a big one for classicism, or anyway massive classical kitsch; for all the Nazi regime harkened back to a mythical Germanic past, Hitler personally hated stuff like “ancient Germanic dress” and folkloric theater architecture, we find out in an interesting chapter on his personal tastes.

More than any particular artistic style, the most successful nationalizers emphasized making room for popular participation. Spaces of the national cult, like memorials to the dead in the Napoleonic wars and so on, were more successful when they had room

for many people to make pilgrimages and participate in rituals. The rituals, in turn, did better when there was something for the crowd to chew on and participate in — songs, call-and-response chanting, the like — as opposed to the more didactic speeches of liberals and socialists. Groups like male choral societies (I guess women who liked to sing were shit out of luck?), sharpshooting groups, and gymnastics clubs came into the picture, giving nationalist content to leisure activities and providing bodies and content for nationalist rituals.

Mosse was a liberal — he was well known at the University of Wisconsin for both attracting and challenging student radicals through his lectures at that active campus — and is specifically arguing against a number of leftist ideas of the time in this book. This sort of cultural history in general flew in the face of the trend of econometrics-informed social “history from below” going at the time. More pertinently, he argued both that the relevant mass in German history was formed not by economic factors like industrialization but by incorporation into the national religion, and that the relationship between socialist/labor mass politics and nationalist/fascist mass politics was a two-way street. There was a commingling of influences and practices between the two groups, according to Mosse, and to the extent the nationalists wound up more successful, it was in part because they understood the dynamics of mass politics in its ritual element better than did their leftist counterparts.

I don’t know enough to judge Mosse’s conclusions there one way or another. Among other things, I’ve never had any meaningful feel for ritual myself. It all strikes me as a lot of nonsense and wasted time — the parts I related to were the “volksfest” elements after the rituals where everyone gathered round to drink beer, exactly the sort of “frivolity” the more severe German nationalists tried to cut out of the movement. But people, or at least enough people, clearly like that sort of thing, enough to make it an important part of regimes like Nazism. Along with “The Crisis of the German Ideology” and “Towards the Final Solution,” this book forms a sort of triptych of Mosse’s efforts to grapple with the cultural and intellectual roots of Nazism — a regime he had to flee as a teenager — that form much of the basis for methodologically similar analyses today.

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