Into the woods

A very special relationship, Germans and their forest

BY DIETER BORCHMEYER

Hardly any other German myth has been cited so many as the forest, celebrated as conscripted as that of the German forest. In Jacob Grimm’s 1815 publication Deutsche Mythologie (Teutonic Mythology), the author singled out the forest as the speciﬁc primordial site of popular belief and German patriotic pride. That the myth of the forest has held firm through the irresistible dissolution of most German myths after the apocalyptic wake of World War II is, at least, a sign that it has ancient origins. For Germans, the forest poses nothing short of a landscape of longing, the epiphany of protective nature – a fact frequently met with astonishment by non-Germans. A stalwart ideological dispute over its preservation and proper use continues to this day, as it receives a constant supply of oxygen from a vigorous environmental movement. The most recent demonstrations in defense of the Hambach Forest are a classic example Commemorating the dead and the work of measuring often converge in the weighty symbolism surrounding forests, as attested by forest cemeteries and tree burials – while environmental pedagogy seeks to unmake woodlands, and includes institutions such as forest kindergartens. Since the mid-1970s, institutions such as forest kindergartens have been set up across Germany in ever greater numbers, as forest feeling has become ever more the symbolic glue that binds Germans together.

The forest as a critical bulwark of ideology as well as an inspiration for formal civilizational theory and polemics which painting, poetry, music and literature of the 19th century and into the back light of a different context it in particular the “German” – a myth that would develop into one of the essential symbols of this identity, and of German heroic national strength. The German forest versus the French forest – no matter how one may assess the consequences of this dichotomy, it represents a cultural opposition that has deﬁned civilization theory and polemics since the early 19th century. For Germans, the forest poses nothing short of a landscape of longing, the epiphany of protective nature – a fact frequently met with astonishment by non-Germans. A stalwart ideological dispute over its preservation and proper use continues to this day, as it receives a constant supply of oxygen from a vigorous environmental movement. The most recent demonstrations in defense of the Hambach Forest are a classic example Commemorating the dead and the work of measuring often converge in the weighty symbolism surrounding forests, as attested by forest cemeteries and tree burials – while environmental pedagogy seeks to unmake woodlands, and includes institutions such as forest kindergartens. Since the mid-1970s, institutions such as forest kindergartens have been set up across Germany in ever greater numbers, as forest feeling has become ever more the symbolic glue that binds Germans together.

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