

Introduction

The Philologist, the King, and the Nation

In August 1846, the folktale collector, grammarian, mythographer, and lexicographer Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) wrote a letter to the Prussian king, Frederick William IV (1795–1861), in which he urged the monarch to support the German-speaking population of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, the areas between Denmark and the German lands.¹ At the time, the Danish king, Christian VIII, was also the duke of the twin duchies and in the summer of 1846, he had publicly declared that they must allow female succession, a reform that would secure continued Danish rule; the Danish royal family was running out of male heirs.² This attempt by the Danish crown to preserve Danish influence over Schleswig and Holstein disturbed German nationalists, among them Jacob Grimm and the five co-signers of his letter, all of them prominent academics in Berlin. A Prussian commitment to protect the German-speaking inhabitants would, Grimm wrote, lift the spirits of the duchies' Germans and help contain the ambitions of the Danish king. Grimm's letter to the king insisted on the principle of nationality: Germans should not be ruled by non-Germans, a "german area [*deutsches gebiet*]" not be chained to a "foreign country [*ein fremdes land*]."³

The argument in Grimm's address to the Prussian king drew on his expertise in Germanic languages and ancient history. It should be recognized as law, Grimm asserted, that those who speak the same language are members of the same nation: "[A]ll who speak the German tongue also belong to the German people and should be able to count on the mighty help of Germany in a time of need."⁴ He quickly added that ancient German tribes, such as the Cimbri and the Teutons, had historically populated the areas.⁵ The primordial communities had not been Danish, he claimed, and hence any Danes in the duchies were latecomers, without a strong historical claim to the territories.⁶ To Grimm, all German speakers

belonged to the German nation and the German nation was entitled to a specific territory, namely the territory that German speakers had occupied since the time of the first Germanic tribes. Presented as a sincere expression of patriotic concern couched in rhetorical conventions of humility toward royalty, the group of scholars headed by Grimm implied that they possessed politically relevant knowledge: the Prussian king could benefit from philological and historical input on where the true borders ran between peoples.

Grimm's letter indicated a subtle shift between old and new ways to conceive of politics, legitimate rule, and territorial disputes. Grimm lauded the Prussian king's "sense of justice," his "strength," and "wisdom"⁷ – traditional virtues ascribed to monarchs. However, he defined the tension over Schleswig and Holstein as a national conflict, one between two distinct peoples who should be disentangled and separately governed. He did not discuss any royal or dynastic rights but instead suggested that knowledge of diachronic linguistic study, ethnic history, and historical occupancy should decide the fate of the duchies. The main purpose of the address may even have been to reconcile monarchy and nationality; it sought to stir the king into action, but with the aim of protecting the linguistic and spatial integrity of the nation. The philologist Jacob Grimm wanted to mediate between the king whom he served and respected and the nation that he had studied and even mapped out.

Against the background of this letter, I would like to introduce a figure: the "philologist king." I use this phrase to mark a departure from the philosopher king, who appeared at the beginning of the history of Western political thought. In the writings of Plato, especially the *Republic*, the philosopher king names a coincidence of authority and knowledge that could come into being if a ruler would begin to philosophize or a philosopher could be prevailed upon to assume the burdens of rule.⁸ According to Plato, both are remote possibilities,⁹ since the ruler with governing experience has to ascend to the heights of a genuine philosopher, but actual philosophers tend to look at human affairs as a distraction from the super-sensible world of forms¹⁰ and deem the "honors of this present world . . . mean and worthless."¹¹ This unlikely coincidence would, however, be the condition for the salvation of the city,¹² because only the ruling philosopher or the philosophizing king would concentrate on "the greatest and most necessary of all things,"¹³ namely to ensure that the human community approximate an ideal condition in which everyone would receive what is good and fitting for them.¹⁴ The philosopher king could only begin to establish this condition in the city by virtue of a singular focus on justice,

which ultimately rests on knowledge of the ideas, the self-subsisting entities that constitute the only real world.¹⁵ In Plato's view, the phenomenal world available to the human senses merely represents an imperfect derivation of the ideas, knowable for those with access to the ordered structure of the actual universe.¹⁶

In Plato's conception of the philosopher king, metaphysical knowledge should serve as the proper foundation of governance. Jacob Grimm did not quarrel with Plato, but by seeking to advise the king and nudge him in the right direction on the basis of his historical and linguistic expertise, Grimm implied the need for a different convergence of knowledge and authority than the one envisioned in the venerable Platonic tradition. Grimm stood for the application of methodically retrieved and highly detailed empirical knowledge of languages and the history of groups of speakers to the political project of establishing non-arbitrary units of rule. In so doing, he sought to promote philology, the scrupulous genealogical study of literary and linguistic development on the basis of surviving textual documents,¹⁷ as the discipline best able to uncover the preconditions of legitimate authority. Thorough and systematic knowledge of grammatical change as well as legal and literary history was essential to understanding how culturally distinct peoples had evolved over time in particular locations, each one defined and united by an individualized language. Germans could and should be separated from Danes, and neither people ruled by non-national, alien regimes. Only a new alliance between historically oriented scholarship and political government would ensure a stable and peaceful human order of differentiated nations. In this sense, Grimm's nationalist interventions encapsulated an epochal shift away from a conception of political rule guided by philosophical thought to one guided by the study of multiple cultures and their distinctive traits. Grimm wished for a "philologist king." The historically evolved nation, not eternal metaphysical ideas, should stand as the ultimate reality of the state.¹⁸

Known today as an iconic collector of folktales, legends, and myths, as a grammarian and dictionary builder, Jacob Grimm was a political figure of his time. Shaped by ideas circulating after the French Revolution, he believed that rule could only obtain legitimacy if it was respectful of an already extant people's identity; that the people could only be adequately defined in linguistic and historical terms; and that the philologist, equipped with a rigorously achieved understanding of the people's cultural and linguistic past, could reliably perform its demarcation, even in a situation of competing claims about its extension and territorial home. Grimm was a nationalist in the sense that he believed in the congruence of

the political order with the national community,¹⁹ but the notion of a “philologist king” captures his belief in the vital function of disciplinary knowledge for the establishment or restoration of such congruence. The king, Grimm believed, had to be philologically well informed.

Grimm devoted his life to scholarship, professed his preference for undisturbed quiet, and admitted that he was relieved not to have to make political decisions.²⁰ In that sense, the philologist shared the Platonic philosopher’s supposed reluctance to amass power and govern;²¹ Grimm, too, had little care for the honors of this present world. He did, however, declare interest in giving rule a proper, even scientific foundation, by making the philological knowledge of the nation the basis of the territorial order. Throughout his life, he repeatedly spoke with confidence about the proper boundaries of nations and did so in a period during which borders in Central Europe were redrawn many times and tiny states integrated into larger units. At the time of Grimm’s birth in 1785, there were several hundred German political entities²² – kingdoms, electorates, duchies, landgraviates, margraviates, bishoprics, imperial cities – loosely integrated in the patchwork that was the Holy Roman Empire; Germany was a “maze of dwarfish princedoms”²³ or a “confused archipelago of principalities.”²⁴ In the year of Grimm’s death, in 1863, that number had been reduced to just below forty units, after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire; the Napoleonic conquest and reconfiguration of German lands; and the reorganization of the continent’s politics at the Congress of Vienna, which resulted in the construction of a confederation of sovereign German states, the *Deutscher Bund*. The plethora of principalities had been consolidated into a smaller number of sovereign entities, with two dominant states (Prussia, Austria), seven midrange states (Bavaria, Württemberg, Hanover, Sachsen, Baden, Hessen-Darmstadt, and Hesse), and about thirty microstates or statelets.²⁵

Grimm’s youth in particular coincided with a period of political volatility and apparent malleability. Areas changed hands several times over short time periods and principalities were conquered, reallocated, restored, or absorbed, and boundaries redrawn.²⁶ The young Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859) would themselves experience regime changes and political reconfigurations in their hometown Kassel in Hesse, where Jacob, the older brother, worked as a civil servant under more than one ruler. During the brothers’ lifetime, then, the shape and internal organization of Germany did not seem settled once and for all. Jacob Grimm may have had an ambivalent, flickering interest in day-to-day politics, but he was consistently and sometimes passionately preoccupied with the delineation of units *for* politics in an era during which those units were being redefined.

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The notion of a philologically informed ruler thus appeared at a particular juncture, when old borders were being erased or revised, and, equally important, traditional feudal and religious justifications of local princely rule were losing their self-evidence. It was in this context that the philologist arrived as a proponent and guardian of a new focus and foundation of politics: the nation, the linguistically and culturally defined people, with its ultimate origin in a supposedly authentic and natural community, the ancient tribe. As the address to the king indicates, the brothers Grimm and most of their fellow nationalists never fundamentally disputed the wisdom and rightness of a strong monarchical government²⁷ even in the post-revolutionary age of its destabilization and desacralization. They did, however, repudiate the prerogative of kings and lords to seize, purchase, or abandon areas as if they were private possessions, without regard for the nationality of their inhabitants; this was in fact still the attitude of traditional autocrats and conservative thinkers.²⁸ Like many of their fellow nationalists in early nineteenth-century Europe, the Grimms believed in a new principle of legitimate rule: rulers and ruled should hail from the same cultural and linguistic group, like reign over like,²⁹ and the king be one among many of the same ethnic kind.³⁰ Royal regimes, shorn of religious sanctification or private-patrimonial rights, could secure legitimacy only if they recognized and persuasively represented cohesive national communities.³¹ As in the letter to the Prussian king, the philologist Grimm ultimately sought to facilitate the marriage of constitutionalized monarchy and geographically bounded nationality. Decidedly not a radical, he stood, he declared to a newspaper just before the elections to the first German national parliament in 1848, for “a free, united fatherland,” but one ruled by “a powerful king,” which meant that he repudiated all “republican desires [*republikanische Gelüste*].”³² By means of such a program, monarchy could lend political unity and capacity to the nation, and the depth and dignity of the nation could help renew and revitalize monarchy – within clearly delineated borders.

Jacob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm believed that modern rulers would benefit from philological counsel, not exactly on how to acquire and maintain power – the philologist could offer no Machiavellian know-how – but on how to identify and respect the particular and naturally evolved linguistic and ethnic character of populations. Grimm would even go further and demand that the king evince an attachment to one and only one people. Legitimate government was, for him, not first and foremost a matter of a just distribution of goods, protected basic rights, or popular consent, but of a close cultural *fit* between rulers and ruled. Even if the philologist could

not direct the king or tell him how to rule by offering prescriptions grounded in philological expertise, the best king in Grimm's eyes would be a ruler who was a friend of the vernacular word, emotionally tied to one particular people rather than desiring to rule over many. This king would ideally possess something of the philologist's intimate knowledge of and love for the *Volk*, construed as a national community of familiarity and solidarity. Instead of a philosophizing ruler, a ruler with the soul of a philosopher,³³ there would be a philologizing king, a king with the heart of a philologist.

A New Image of the Brothers Grimm

With its focus on the brothers Grimm as supporters of a new type of ruler, a philologist king, this book seeks to make two contributions. First, it sets out to transform the established image of the brothers Grimm as homey folklorists, lovers of German words and stories, by situating them more systematically and thoroughly in the intellectual and political context of their day. By doing so, however, it also wants to cast light on early nineteenth-century nationalism and its intellectual exponents, the academic entrepreneurs of modern politicized nationhood, with particular attention to the relationship between new methods of knowledge production and established political institutions and forms of authority.

For us today, the fame of the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm is above all tied to the enduring success of their early book *Children's and Household Tales* [*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*]. This volume, translated again and again into numerous languages, has come to define the fairy-tale genre and turned the brothers Grimm into world-famous storytellers. Many Germans also associate the brothers with the still used multivolume German dictionary that they began late in their careers, the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. A more productive scholar than his brother, Jacob Grimm published an enormous work of German grammar, *Deutsche Grammatik*, quickly recognized as a pioneering work of linguistic history, which established the so-called Grimm's Law on the basis of observed regularities in sound shifts across time. Many commentators see the link between the scholarly projects of folktale collection, dictionary compilation, and diachronic grammatical analysis and the attempt to cultivate or even generate a national consciousness among a growing nineteenth-century reading public. "Nationalism," a contemporary historian of Germany writes, "was . . . a cause of the educated middle class, who defined (even created) the idea of a German nation with their grammars, dictionaries, and collections of folk tales."³⁴

This is not an uncommon claim, but the historian neglects to tell us that the authors of the most celebrated and influential German grammar, German dictionary, and German folktale collection were Jacob Grimm and his brother. Behind the phrase “the educated middle class,” one finds two actual individuals, a pair of philologists, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, and the two really were immensely prolific. The poet Heinrich Heine jokingly speculated that Jacob Grimm had sold his soul to the devil to complete single-handedly the colossal German grammar, and that tome was only one of his many contributions.³⁵

The importance of the brothers Grimm for the rise of German national consciousness has rarely been under dispute, and their wish to “stimulate national sentiment” is well documented.³⁶ German scholars have also mapped out the political opinions of Jacob Grimm especially,³⁷ reconstructed his relationship with emerging ideologies of his era,³⁸ and sometimes also criticized, or even ridiculed, his somewhat dilettantish relationship to the realities of political life.³⁹ Nor have scholars neglected to consider the value commitments that guided the revision and progressive embellishment of their influential folktale collection. American folklorists and literary scholars, for example, have uncovered the editorial efforts of Wilhelm Grimm in particular to remove references to sexuality and deviant behavior⁴⁰ and reinforce the early nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of honesty, diligence, and industriousness.⁴¹ In this way, studies have rightfully focused on how the Grimms and their fellow collectors explored the world of popular dialects, tales, and tunes to forge a secular, cross-class vernacular culture that could facilitate national integration.⁴² Grimms’ tales are still one of the most famous examples of how university-educated, broadly “middle-class” enthusiasts contributed to cultural nation building in the nineteenth century.

This book intends to show, however, that the Grimms’ energies or at least their hopes and dreams were also directed toward the princes, electors, and kings who governed German lands, and it sets out to capture with greater precision than before how the brothers envisioned the relationship between their own scholarship and national-political projects, and the tie between the authority of philological research and the power of traditional elites. The Grimms, who were lifelong civil servants employed or sponsored by very traditional leaders, saw themselves not just as public educators of the people but as mediators between rulers and ruled. As nationally oriented philologists, the Grimms cared about and sought to give definition to the *Volk*, but they were also attentive to the current regimes they knew so well and believed that kings should receive proper philological advice of the kind exemplified

in the 1846 letter to the Prussian ruler. This reconstruction of philology's vocation, as illustrated most prominently by Jacob Grimm, points to the political purpose of a new set of research disciplines devoted to the exploration of national being, such as vernacular literary and historical legal studies. Grimm's voluminous reconstructions of German grammar, German legal antiquities, and the history of German tribes ultimately belonged to a vision of a mutually reinforcing alliance between politics and knowledge production deemed appropriate to an era of politicized national collectives. We can thus locate the philologist's efforts in a constellation composed of three elements, where the scholar appears as a mediator between the king, on the one hand, and the linguistically and culturally defined people, on the other. The philologist could mobilize disciplinary knowledge to broker a new relationship between regimes and peoples on the basis of shared nationality.

This book's focus on the triad king–philologist–people is more appropriate for an era in which the memory of the French Revolution and the notion of popular consent to rule pervaded the political imagination⁴³ and news of regicides, republics, and new law codes circulated among broad population groups,⁴⁴ but which was nonetheless still politically dominated by restored, consolidated, or constrained monarchies. Even after the era of transatlantic revolutions, European kings retained massive possessions, remained heads of state, led armies, conducted diplomacy, managed bureaucracies, cultivated courtly rituals, and even exploited new forms of mass communication;⁴⁵ intellectuals responded to the situation by seeking to reconcile a recognition of popular freedom with the persistence of traditional rule.⁴⁶ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were representatives of their age: they were neither radical democrats set on toppling the king nor staunch monarchists who rejected ideas of popular influence and constitutional checks on government. Instead, they believed in forms of adjustment between a unitary people and an informed, moderate, and loving king, within the frame of a philologically outlined nationhood. Political rule could become less intrusive and coercive, more adaptable and sensitive, if the people could be reminded of their evolved historical and cultural character and disentangled from arbitrary political boundaries indifferent to nationality, and if the princes and kings could gain a deeper understanding and more heartfelt appreciation of the nation's invaluable particularity. By seeking to reawaken the people and gently rein in the ambitions of kings, the philologist wanted to work toward a more harmonious coincidence of nation and monarchical rule.

The Character of Nationalism

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Attention to the figure of the philologist king will facilitate a deeper understanding of the Grimms' vocation in the political world of their era and more broadly illuminate the ambitions of modern, nationally oriented philology. In addition, the focus of this study will cast some light on the peculiar character of nationalism itself, which has often been regarded as politically influential but philosophically feeble, lacking the developed justifications that rival ideologies possess.⁴⁷ Liberalism, socialism, and conservatism have all been philosophically articulated by key figures in the history of political thought, such as Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, and Edmund Burke. By contrast, defenders of nationalism have been rare and the canon of nationalist philosophical works correspondingly slender;⁴⁸ the principle of nationality, one historian claims, was developed by narrow "second-rank thinkers"⁴⁹ and its doctrines, the sociologist Ernest Gellner writes, "are hardly worth analyzing."⁵⁰ But celebrated political philosophers did not simply decline to work out a defense for the nation; they did not quite appreciate nationalism's force and persistence. While prominent thinkers imagined and prophesized the growth of bureaucracy (Max Weber), the revolutionary upheavals of modern society (Mikhail Bakunin), the spread of conformism in egalitarian societies (Alexis de Tocqueville), or the accelerated rate of technological change and the eruption of class conflict (Marx), the struggle for national self-determination arguably found no prophet or early analyst among the most illustrious minds.⁵¹ Among those who did develop a philosophy of nationalism, German thinkers around 1800 predominate.⁵² Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) is known for his enthusiastic celebration of the dynamic plurality of culturally distinct human communities. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* from 1808, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) proclaimed the necessity of a vigorous, organized political defense of such communities as shared sources of meaning and objects of morally valuable attachment. Yet Herder and Fichte are exceptions and hardly count among the most revered and famous political thinkers.

The philosophical and normative deficit in nationalism persists to this day. Few political theorists attempt to justify the special solidarity within a nation or the integrity of national borders, although there are a handful of exceptions.⁵³ The perpetuation of strong national group loyalty is rarely viewed as an important political goal in itself and is frequently seen as an obstacle to the formation of more inclusive and tolerant societies, although the active dismantling of enduring cultural

identities is perhaps not understood as a moral priority either.⁵⁴ In view of the relative paucity of normative arguments for nationalism, the anthropologist Benedict Anderson famously suggested that it is simply not a conceptually articulated ideology to be compared with liberalism or conservatism, but something more akin to a religion in its appeal to finite individuals' hopes for a some kind of afterlife in the form of an indefinitely enduring collective, namely the national community.⁵⁵

This obviously does not mean that nationalism throughout its history has lacked supporters among scholars or intellectuals, although they have not gained much respect in the realm of political thought. This study of the philologist king as an ideal is intended to explore the character and logic of the ambitions and efforts of nationalists, as exemplified by the careers and thought of Jacob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm. The brothers were not philosophers or politicians or activists, but rather librarians, collectors, editors, lexicographers, and grammarians,⁵⁶ who for the most part were employed by German princely states of different sizes. They searched through archives for manuscripts; compiled enormous inventories of poetic, narrative, mythological, historical, and legal materials; and transcribed tales and legends that circulated among people of their time, all to retrieve, organize, and disseminate the traces of an ancient but localizable German collective life as an object of indispensable significance even to the state and its head, the king. In this endeavor, the Grimms were not alone but emerged as two of the most prominent and groundbreaking representatives of a much larger group of professional and amateur scholars in folkloristics, historical linguistics, literary and legal history, and national historiography, fields devoted to the exploration, or the demonstration, of the historical depth, character, and spatial home of the German nation. There were, one can say without much exaggeration, entire academic disciplines or subdisciplines with particular scholarly-technical skills dedicated to the delineation and substantiation of the nation.⁵⁷ Nor were the Grimms internationally isolated; Jacob Grimm's Serbian contemporary, ally, and counterpart Vuk Karadžić (1787–1867), to name just one example, similarly forged links between linguistic study and national demarcation.⁵⁸

Even so, the political purpose in the Grimms' efforts can sometimes be hard to discern, in part because of their peculiar, non-philosophical or even anti-philosophical style of presentation, in which methodical accumulation took precedence over explicit argumentation. Jacob Grimm's late work on the history of the German language was a huge compilation of surviving textual data on ancient German communities, but its slender introduction briefly stated that the whole was political "through