
The immediacy of a remote past:

The afterlife of Widukind in the Third Reich

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IN THE EARLY YEARS of the Third Reich, Nazi ideologues and propagandists loudly proclaimed the rebirth of the German nation. But when exactly had it first been born, and when had it first died? Numerous Nazis – including Rosenberg, Himmler and Darré – looked back to the late 8th and early 9th centuries, constructing an ordinary myth of a pristine Germanic and pagan Germany, championed by the Saxon war-lord ‘Duke’ Widukind, and its destruction at the hands of Charlemagne, Romanism and Christianity. But, even within the Nazi Party’s leadership, this proved a highly controversial view. Just as the regime seemed poised to begin to fulfil its totalitarian ambitions and impose ideological uniformity on Germans, a furious public debate broke out. It was about the origins and meaning of German history, and ultimately about what it meant to be German. No Nazi doubted that events from which modern Germans were separated by more than a millennium posed urgent questions for the present, and Charlemagne’s Saxon wars acquired other kinds of immediacy in Nazi historical imaginations.

In this article – an edited extract from the paper¹ I gave at the June 2013 British Academy Conference on ‘Uses of the Past in Past Societies: A Global Perspective’ – I argue that Himmler was by no means unique among Nazi ideologues in his belief in reincarnation. I trace fantasies of reincarnation through the celebration of Widukind by the prominent Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, and through two of the several historical novels heroising Widukind. As a genre, historical novels flourished in the Third Reich, conveying enthusiasm for the past by making it seem familiar.

Alfred Rosenberg

Battle-lines drawn in the 8th century were held to be essentially *the same* as those of the 20th century. The conflicts were constructed as racial and religious, and so as ancestral. Rosenberg established a chain which ran from Widukind back in time to Arminius – Hermann the Cheruscan, whose forces had annihilated two of Caesar Augustus’s legions – and forward to Hitler himself. The Nazi Party’s daily newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, proclaimed that, in the wake of ‘the rebirth of the nation’ and after an interval ‘of 1,100 years, Widukind’s spirit has

Dr Peter Lambert and Professor Björn Weiler – both of the Department of History & Welsh History at Aberystwyth University – were joint organisers of the British Academy Conference on ‘Uses of the Past in Past Societies: A Global Perspective’, held at the British Academy on 11-12 June 2013. The conference brought together an international group of historians, anthropologists and art historians with expertise ranging from the 11th century to the 21st, and from Byzantium to post-colonial Ghana. They asked how societies have engaged with, debated, refashioned and used their pasts. Among the several themes to have emerged repeatedly in the course of the conference were two which Lambert’s extract exemplifies: first, an obsession with ancestry; second, a willingness to imagine or invent pasts which transcended divides between quasi-professional historians and others pursuing historical interests. More information can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2013

Each year the British Academy holds up to six ‘British Academy Conferences’ – pivotal events of lasting significance, at which leading-edge research of the highest calibre can be presented and discussed. Held over one or two days, these conferences provide particular opportunities for multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives.

come back to life in the German people. It is only today that the Saxon struggle for freedom finds its historical appreciation and continuation.’ Here, the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s journalist echoed Rosenberg’s view: the Third Reich did *not* pick up where the First Reich had left off. Rather, it completed the work of a string of ‘rebels against the Reich’ and, by extension, connected with a pure Germanic past before ‘oriental’ contamination had set in.²

¹ ‘The proximity of a remote past: the afterlives of Charlemagne and Widukind in Nazi Germany’.

² *Völkischer Beobachter* (North-German edn), 16 August 1934, Supplement: ‘Ältester deutscher Adel in Westfalen. Die sieben Sattelmeyer von Enger.’



Figure 1. The 'Saxon Grove' at Verden an der Aller: the Nazis' monument to the 4,500 Saxons allegedly executed on Charlemagne's orders. Why did the Nazis commemorate an event of the 8th century with a monument that seemed to echo stone circles and avenues of the Neolithic or the Bronze Age? Photo: Patricia Duncker.

And, in what was trumpeted as an epoch of national rebirth, a belief in reincarnation shaped appreciations of Widukind and Charlemagne. Widukind may have been 'defeated in the ninth century' but, according to Rosenberg, 'in the twentieth, he triumphs in the person of Adolf Hitler'.³ Even more striking in their literal-mindedness, other Nazis used the motif of reincarnation to establish Widukind's place in German history.

Fritz Vater

In the Third Reich, dividing lines between genres of historical writing and historical fiction, and between historical evidence and products of the imagination, were programmatically blurred. Fritz Vater's Widukind-novel, *Weking* (first published in 1938), has been described as an 'SS-novel'.⁴ It is not only manifestly underpinned by a considerable body of research, but exposes the research in a scholarly apparatus. As well as maps and genealogies, there are ten pages of endnotes, incorporating references to primary sources and to secondary literature. The book's premise, namely that the contemporary documentary record comprises nothing but a catalogue of Carolingian falsifications, legitimised Vater's representation of his fiction as conveying a deeper historical truth. Early on in the tale, he introduced his readers to the Godenhof. Functioning partly as Saxon military training academy, partly as school in politics, and partly as a sort of pagan priestly seminary, it was an unmistakable forerunner of the Nazis' would-be elite schools. Widukind was one of its graduates. At first sight, the Godenhof appeared like any Saxon noble's farmstead. But at its heart was a domed building which boasted glass panes in its windows. This Saxon institution, then, was not some archaic remnant of a barbarian people about to have civilisation thrust upon it: the glass panels were intended by Vater to serve as windows into an 8th-century modernity. Through them, one might see the leather-upholstered chair

in which Godwin, the establishment's director, would recline in cultivated comfort after his educational labours.⁵

Beside the Godenhof, Vater imagined a processional path leading to the Eggestern Stone, a holy place of the Saxons. As Ruotwolt, Godwin's chosen successor, walked along it with the sword-companions of the Godenhof, he 'grew conscious of the fact that for centuries the ancestors ... had trodden this path ..., urged on by the same sense of holiness' as now began to overcome Ruotwolt himself. 'Almost unconscious of his own self', he

lived for a while beyond space and time: things past and things yet to come flowed toward him, meeting within him; he felt close to eternity, and knew it to be laid into *his* hands, entrusted to *his* spirit, and the weight of the responsibility and sacrality of this task seized his being.

'We are the ancestors' he whispered to himself – and reeled under the shock of the grandeur of this idea. Yet he could not withdraw from it: it was right. We are the ancestors and are our descendants too. Nothing will be able to make us deviate from our path. We will pursue it to the end – because the Guardians wish it. ... We cannot err, neither we nor our grandchildren, if the ancestors live in and work through us.

The site was simultaneously also where the cremated remains of Arminius were preserved. Thus, beyond the common postulation that the Chersucans had dissolved into the Saxon tribe, he posited a more direct link between 1st-century rebels against Rome and 8th-century rebels against Charlemagne's romanising empire. 'Surely', Ruotwolt mused, Arminius too had been guided by a presentiment of the Reich.⁶

Edmund Schopen

Published in 1936, the first volume of Edmund Schopen's *History of the Concept of the Reich* opened with a novella about Widukind.⁷ Like Vater's tale, it commingled ancestry with sacrality, and used these themes to draw the ties between Arminius and Widukind closer still. In one scene, Widukind appeared on the eve of a battle at Detmold. Having ridden at dead of night through the Teutoburg forest, Widukind dismounted to enter a silent, pitch-black ravine. He was on a quest, seeking a prophecy. But what he first encountered was the stuff of nightmares: things that were 'alive, slithering and hissing' as they fled from under his feet, and then 'metal objects ... and something else that broke like old bone'. His 'chest tightened' with a 'silent

³ Rosenberg, quoted in the front-page banner headline of the *Völkischer Beobachter* (North-German edn), 26 June 1934.

⁴ Fritz Vater, *Weking: Die Saga vom Heldenkampf der Niedersachsen* (Munich, Franz Eher, 1938; 4th edn, 1943); Frank Westenfelder, *Genese, Problematik und Wirkung nationalsozialistischer Literatur am Beispiel des historischen Romans zwischen 1890 und 1945* (Frankfurt

a.M., Peter Lang, 1989), p. 252.

⁵ Vater, *Weking.*, pp. 9-11; 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.

⁷ 'Widukinds Knappe', in Edmund Schopen, *Geschichte der Reichsidee* vol. 1 (Munich, Carl Röhrig, 1936), pp. 13-161.

dread' lest he was 'really in a mausoleum' and being given a clear sign of the outcome of the following day's battle.

Then Widukind nearly jumped out of his skin when into his daydream there fell a deep, clear voice. Soft and melodic as the full, mild tone of a lyre.

'Welcome, Widukind!'

Silently he stood. Amazed, his gaze measured the high figure which towered above him, the mightiest of men, by a head. ...

Like a child, he was standing before the Wala of his people.

The Wala – variously a goddess or a priestess-cum-prophetess in Germanic myth – led Widukind below ground, into a cavernous shrine. She stopped at the edge of a lake, onto whose 'still mirror' Widukind's eyes rested. He began to look deep into it, until he discerned its last depths. There, he saw at first rune-like patterns in the rock – and then something else, 'like the figure of a man. Yes: a man'. The figure was 'covered by a round shield ... with the same tribal device upon it as his own shield carried: the quadriskele, the emblem of the sun'. As his widening eyes 'greedily ... drank in the picture', the resemblances to himself multiplied: the same 'red-blond curls', the same beard. 'Was it not the long, narrow face, the giant-limbed frame, the long-legged figure



Figure 2. Statue of Widukind, at Herford in Germany, originally created by sculptor Heinrich Wefing in 1899 (the face may well be that of Kaiser Wilhelm I). It represents a myth in which Widukind, although already nominally Christian, challenged Christ to prove his power by letting water run at a rocky spot in Bergkirchen, Bad Oeyenhausen; the subsequent welling up of a spring played a key part in Widukind's 'inner' conversion, and the foundation of a church erected above the site was attributed to him. The statue disappeared in 1942, probably smelted down by the Nazis for the war effort. Neither the Christian associations nor the winged helmet and beard would have suited Nazi tastes. The statue in place now is a 1959 copy. Photo: M. Kunz (Wikimedia Commons)

of his own body? Was it not he himself who lay there, a fallen dead hero?"

But just as Widukind began to fear that the seer was showing him his own fate in the imminent battle, she answered his unspoken question:

No! It is not you yourself. You will live. Even through tomorrow, the hardest day of your life, you will survive! Your work is not yet done. Only now is it beginning. When you have overcome, it will begin. That is why I showed him to you. He had begun it. You will continue it. One who comes after will complete it. All of one lineage. Your great ancestor. Your descendant. Did you not know that it was your great ancestor, Siegfried Arminius, who fought the battle up there on this very ground 800 years before you and drove the Romans away? Yes, Widukind, you are of Cheruscan descent. For a thousand years have you lived on this soil.

All the tribes of the region had merged to become Saxons, she explained, only for the Saxons to divide into new petty tribes.

And you want to unite them once more. And you will, Widukind! And your descendant will achieve even more than you! ... You are Germanic people! The new world!

'My ancestor!' stammered the man.

'Your ancestor!'

the Wala responded. But then she immediately blurred the line between ancestry and reincarnation, explaining that 'Men of his retinue brought the murdered man down to me. To me or to another. We are all the same.' Schopen's ambiguity was studied. The precise congruity between the image of Arminius and the appearance of the living Widukind hinted strongly at something more than two links in an ancestral line spanning eight centuries, and the Wala's persisting with the first person singular to explain Arminius's conveyance into the shrine reinforced the intimation that shared blood conveyed immortality. For 'I carried the dead man's body and lowered it into this ground', she continued, 'so that his image would be preserved. For you had to see him and to know that it is your destiny to struggle as he had done against that which is foreign within us, not against ourselves.'⁸

Widukind awoke with the dawn, not knowing what to make of the Wala's parting injunction and unsure as to whether, having set out to find this 'figure of myth', he had only dreamed her. Only after the Saxons' defeat in the battle was he sure – and able to interpret the Wala's riddle. Thus

far, he had been too modest in his goals. Not the unification of the Saxon tribes alone was to be his task. He must unite *all* the Germanic tribes whose internecine struggles he now recognised as civil war. 'It seemed to Widukind as if the bloody days that lay behind him pulled a veil from before his eyes. Are the Franks we ourselves? Are the Franks and Bavarians and Allemans that which we Saxons are? Yes: we are altogether only one Germania after all.' That being so, in a sense even 'Karl's Reich was his Reich.' However, if the Saxons must therefore be 'melted into' the other Germanic tribes within Charlemagne's polity, Saxony must then 'conquer this Reich, which was threatening to become Roman, from within.' Thus, it 'was necessary not only' that Widukind 'liberate his own people, but also the Franks themselves from this over-mighty power. It was not the forced rule of the state, but over the soul.' There was 'one thing that they must all kill and exterminate [*ausrotten*] in themselves and in this Reich, namely that which was alien and wanted to force itself into the Germanic soul: the Latin, the Roman, the outlandish Italianate spirit.'⁹

Preordained

For the Nazi and other *völkisch* admirers of the Germanic tribes, the discovery of an ancient past was a road to self-discovery. Their biological-racial view of history collapsed time. For them, time was not linear but flowed, like racial ancestry, in a stream. Passing back through 1,100 years involved no great journey, no discovery of a strange people in a strange period. This is what Fritz Vater captured in his hero's ringing declaration: 'We are the ancestors!' Such ancestor-worshippers were thus worshipping themselves. The 'logic' of their position was clear. Really to understand the Germanic past was an urgent duty, for grasping that past allowed 20th-century Germans to comprehend their own preordained tasks. 'We must learn to comprehend the great world-political connections which explain the present out of the past and determine the future', urged Edmund Schopen. 'The Saxon struggles under Widukind' had given rise to a 'thousand years' labour' carried by the 'great Saxon community of the blood' which had, 'constantly and in the face of setbacks, wrestled a German national Reich free of a Reich entity which had fallen under the spiritual dominance of Romandom.' The Saxons' endeavours had 'found their coronation only in the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler, in which the last remnants of foreign infiltration are being removed in all cultural domains and a pure Germanic state is being formed.' Therein lay '*the meaning of the saga of the Reich*.'¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., pp. 109-15.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 128-30.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 9-10.