

**How did German Romantic Nationalists transform Sparta from an ideal political community to a superior “people” and ultimately “race” whose nature is to dominate “inferior” peoples?**

During eighteenth-century Europe, Sparta’s ancient history was appropriated by many different cultures. National unification of European nations post-French Revolution allowed the leaders of the new nationalistic paradigm to revisit Sparta’s ancient history as a model for liberty, virtue, and patriotism. Similar to Plato's affinity with Spartan society in relation to reforming the Athenian polis, contemporary European historians, philosophers, and politicians appropriated Sparta's history to reform their societies after the destruction of many European monarchies. German Romantic Nationalism did not form post-French Revolution instantly; however, no European nation idolized and appropriated Spartan history as extensively as Germany during the reign of National Socialism. German Romantic Nationalists transformed Sparta from an ideal political community to a superior race that naturally dominated “inferior” people by singling out specific aspects of Spartan society and establishing genetic lineage to Dorians to give validity to Herrvolk, Aryans' entitlement to dominate and a social structure that replaces individualism with unchallenged nationalism. The revitalized aspects of Spartan society and history that German Nationalists focused on appropriating were the migration of the Dorians into the Peloponnese, the subjugation of the Helot population, the Spartan education system, Sparta’s eugenic laws, and communitarian society validated through accounts of the Battle of Thermopylae. To understand the appropriation of Spartan history that gave validity to German Romantic Nationalist ideology and its implication in Nazi Germany, I will provide a summary of each Spartan aspect appropriated by German Nationalists. After I describe these different parts of Spartan society, I will explain how German Romantic Nationalists appropriated them.

The beginning of Spartan city-state began with a group called Dorians who moved from the northern region of Greece to the south of the Peloponnese region. This event was called the Dorian invasion. The process of how the Dorians became a structured military Spartan nation post-migration is not essential to understanding German Nationalism. Instead, we only have to understand that this process leads to a Spartan society dependent on the subjugation of Helots to feed Spartan society. Dorians were agricultural peasants who restructured their society from individualistic agriculture to militarized crop-sharing that Spartans depended on to survive. To maintain the subjugation of Helots, Spartans created institutions that manufactured communal socialization and strong nationalistic ideas. It is essential to understand that Dorians were considered individualistic agrarian people before migrating to the Peloponnese region. Post-Dorian invasion, Sparta created the condition, the subjugation of Helots, that forced communal ideology to become necessary for a functioning society.

The subjugation of Helots is not only related to the change in individualistic agrarian social norms to Spartan nationalism. This change manifested communal Spartan institutions, eugenic social norms, and Spartan nationalism, for which German Nationalists found an affinity. The Spartan Agoge was one of the institutions appropriated by German Nationalists. Its purpose was to socialize Spartan men into agents who carried out the militaristic ambitions of the state. Sparta's dependence on its military is related to its subjugation of the Helot population, which Sparta must always control to maintain feeding its society. Additionally, Sparta had strong ambitions of conquest and other enemies like the Persians or Athenians that required Sparta to maintain its military prowess. Many accounts from ancient Greek philosophers Xenophon, Plato, Pericles, and Plutarch allow the structure of the Agoge to be credible; even Plutarch, who wrote on Athens nearly five hundred years after the other sources listed, offers validity through

the conservative nature of Sparta (Powell 2018, 528). Structures of the Agoge remained similar between each source's account because Sparta's conservative ideology prevented the Agoge from changing dramatically over a long period of time.

“First, from around seven years of age, he belongs to the *paides* (Xenophon, *Lak. Pol.*, 2. 1–2 with Ducat 2006, 85–6): at that stage he probably could start learning letters and arithmetic. Later, towards fourteen years of age (Ducat 2006, 89–90), he was part of the *paidiskoi*. Then, at twenty, he joined the group of *hēbō ntes* (these three stages are also mentioned by Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 5. 4. 32, and these terms may have been the ones actually used at Sparta, according to Ducat 2006, 89–91 and 101 on age limits) (Powell 2018, 528).”

Within this education, from seven to twenty, besides the early teachings of literacy, it is entirely an education surrounding the art of war. Young Spartan men entered a socialization process where the *Syssitia*, the communal group men were assigned to, replaced the role of the family. Younger men in the Agoge could be subjected to fatherly roles by an older man in the *Syssitia*. Moreover, young boys were assigned one older Spartan man who would behave somewhat as a surrogate father. The relationship with their mother, besides the status they received from her at birth, was focused on bringing honor to her through acts in battle and conquest. Life was focused on physical activity; Ephors constantly monitored Spartans' physical shape. They were also given incentives to perform well with opportunities for upward mobility in an individual's status. For example, becoming a *hippeis*, an elite group of three hundred Spartans acting as military police could be achieved after earning the title *Krypteia*. *Krypteia* was earned by a young Spartan man who separated himself from society for a year with minimal resources. All aspects of the male Spartan life are composed of training and executing the best possible actions for the community. His contribution decides a Spartan's worth. The Agoge socializes to the extent that the emotions of Spartan men are related to the success of the group. It is believed that

the education of Spartan women paralleled that of the men - physical and mental socialization for the benefit of the state. However, there is no evidence that state-sponsored women's education.

The Spartan Agoge and militaristic society contributed to Sparta's eugenic practices. To maintain Sparta's military prowess, eugenic practices like selective breeding, infanticide, wife-sharing, and physical education were believed to support the addition of men needed to support the hoplite army. For example, men's physical education is partly to create an effective soldier, but it is also because Spartans believed more fit men conceived more fit children. Moreover, women's physical education was not only for presentation during festivals but also for the idea that fitter women could bear more male children eligible for the Agoge. Besides payments towards the Syssitia, young boys had to meet physical requirements to become Spartan warriors. An example of this physical standard is portrayed in the movie "300", a live-action film based on Frank Muller's comic series "300." The Spartan, Ephialtes, a proponent at The Battle of Thermopylae, is depicted in a scene begging the Spartan king, Leonidas, to join the Hoplite army. Leonidas undoubtedly denies Ephialtes' request because he is physically deformed.

The last aspect of Spartan history I will describe, romanticized by German Nationalists, was the Battle at Thermopylae during the Persian War. Multiple Greek city-states formed a coalition to stop King Xerxes and the Persian Army from invading Greece. Information had spread through the coalition that the Persian army had amassed its military outside the wall at Thermopylae. In response, the coalition, led by Spartan King Leonidas, sent a couple of thousand men, three hundred of whom were Spartans, to defend the passage at Thermopylae. King Leonidas and the rest of the coalition knew that the Persian army vastly outnumbered them. King Xerxes knew that the Spartans were a prominent force with dangerous military capabilities.

Thermopylae allowed the Spartans to defend the narrow passage strategically. The Persians could not penetrate the passage until a Spartan, Ephialtes, who was outcasted for his physical deformities, informed the Persian king of a route around the wall Thermopylae, allowing the whole Persian army to fight the coalition. As the Persians ascended through the mountain, they faced a force of 1,000 Phocians that were easily defeated. Now, the path towards Thermopylae was clear. The Persian army then successfully defeats Leonidas, the three hundred Spartans, and the remaining coalition. The Spartans who were killed were memorialized. Two Spartans who returned as messengers were outcasted in Spartan society; one of those men, Pantites, hung himself from the suffering of dishonor.

Without primary Spartan sources, a vacuum of accurate Spartan history was filled by myth. Both ancient and contemporary sources created their own image of Sparta, which was more related to their relationship with Sparta than an unbiased account of their society (Chapoutot 2016, 215). Within this vacuum, German Romantic Nationalists appropriated aspects of Spartan history and established genetic lineage to Dorians to validate Herrenvolk, Aryans' entitlement to dominate, and a social structure that replaced individualism with unchallenged nationalism. Before the development of National Socialism in Germany, Sparta was mainly recognized as an example of nationalism and patriotism. In Germany, after World War I, this example of nationalism and patriotism was tied to the mythical German's genetic relation to Spartans in a successful attempt to establish the ideologies of a superior race in Nazi Germany.

Herrenvolk is a German term that translates to "master race" in English. Hitler and the National socialist appropriated aspects of the Dorian invasion and Sparta's eugenic practices to validate Nazi propaganda of the German master race and their predisposition to dominate others.

“Following the end of the First World War, in German historiography the pluralist interpretation of Sparta, which had characterized earlier research, was abandoned over-enthusiasm for Sparta was based on the conviction that the peoples on the Rhine and on the Eurotas were racially closely connected and had a common Nordic background. It was argued that the ancient Spartans liked a strong state and took care of the Volk as the modern Germans did. However, the new image of Sparta, which was popularized through a flood of racist and völkisch publications.... The vision of Sparta, propagated in the Third Reich, was essentially influenced by the adaptation of obscure racial categories, the revival of the Romantic dichotomy between Dorians and Ionians..(Powell & Rebenich2018, 699).”

The Dorian migration from northern Greece is evidence of the Nordic genealogy connecting Dorians and Germans. Once this genetic relation is established, the actions of Dorians subjecting the Helot population were interpreted as a Nordic superiority over the native population. This superiority is attributed to the Spartans being able to control hundreds of thousands of Helots with only thousands of Spartans. Moreover, Helots' subjugation was interpreted as precedence of the Nordic people. If Dorians were superior to Helots and Germans are related to Dorians, then Germans are still a superior race today.

“the origins of Sparta, whose founding was attributed to “a migration of peasants from the North” chased out of their natural home by “a demographic surplus.”<sup>153</sup> Directly tracing a parallel with the medieval Germanic occupation of the East, he specifically instructed young readers to “understand these migrations as similar to their countrymen’s colonizing expeditions to the East in the Middle Ages (Chapoutot 2016, 219).”

Similar to establishing the German master race, the idea of naturally dominating Europe is tied to the precedence that their genetic ancestors did the same in the Peloponnese region thousands of years before.

“It is well known to all that the exclusion of weak infants was practiced among the ancient Spartans. According to Plutarch, the legislator Lycurgus had very specific selective goals in mind.” This Spartan custom was part of a much broader shared racial and cultural tradition common to the Indo-Germanic peoples: “The elimination of infants was widely practiced in classical antiquity, and the practice was open. This custom appears to have been a trait of the Indo-Germanic race (Chapoutot 2016, 222).

Eugenic practices were taboo in Nazi Germany. Sparta’s eugenic practices were used to model what types of people a society should tolerate to be functional. While National Socialism might endorse strict eugenic ideology without Sparta as a model, it does not offer validity without the belief that those eugenic practices come from genetically related people who have lived by those social norms.

The peasant life of Dorians pre-migration and the Battle at Thermopylae were also appropriated under a similar context.

“The Spartans integrated their body politic by reducing material life to formulae of extraction and redistribution. *Klēroi* were allotted and reallocated, rents collected from the helots, contributions paid into *syssitia*, and surplus food either circulated from the messes or were used to barter in a vast exercise in suppressing manifestations of individualistic and opportunistic behavior (Powell 2018, 588).”

National Socialists wanted to create a German society where individualism was non-existent. To maintain control of the Helots, the peasant Dorians had to sacrifice their individualism for the Spartan system. National Socialists wanted individualism in Germany to change into unchallenged nationalism supported by the belief that their Nordic Dorian ancestors also sacrificed their individuality before. The pinnacle of this individualistic sacrifice is appropriated through the Battle of Thermopylae.

“The Nazi elite had abused Simonides’ words and invoked supposed Spartan ‘virtues’ to drive army corps to their doom. In the last days of the battle of Stalingrad, the ReichsField Marshal Hermann Göring reminded the troops of the

hopeless fight of Leonidas and his 300 comrades, pointed to this heroic example of 'highest soldiership' and predicted a new reading of the epitaph: 'If you come to Germany, tell them you have seen us fighting in Stalingrad, obedient to the law, the law for the security of our people' (Powell & Rebenich 2018, 686)

Stalingrad was a Soviet city occupied by the Germans during World War II. After the Soviets regained a strategic position, it became impossible for the Germans to hold Stalingrad. Instead of surrendering, Hitler found validation in leaving his men to die by alluding to the Battle of Thermopylae as a precedent for the fate of the modern Nordic Germans.

German Romantic Nationalists wanted to eliminate the democratic and individualistic aspects of German society post-World War I. They offered validity to their unethical ideas by connecting ancient mythology to genetically consistent Nordic people who are now the modern-day Germans. Spartans were not under the condition of racial superiority. They were under the condition of maintaining control through military and slavery. This structure forced the Spartans to adopt communal social norms. Hitler and the National Socialists ignored these the causes of Sparta's communitarianism to establish their contemporary ideas towards race. Replacing Sparta's history with precedence to racial superiority that could be revitalized on the belief that Germans are the same Nordic people as the Dorians.

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