“Vegetarianism was part of social reformism”

Corinna Treitel, Department Chair and Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, in conversation with Julia Malitska on dreams about and attempts at dietary reform in the 19th and 20th centuries, and on German life reformers and their long lasting, but forgotten, impacts on the ways we think today about eating naturally and environmentally consciously.

Specializing in the interplay of modern science, medicine, culture, and politics in German history, Professor Treitel is one of the most influential scholars of modern European history. She helped introduce Medical Humanities as a field of study to Washington University in St. Louis in 2015. Her first book, A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern, asked why Germany, a scientific powerhouse in the 19th and 20th centuries, also hosted one of the Western world’s most vibrant and influential occult movements. Her second book, Eating Nature in Modern Germany: Food, Agriculture, and Environment, c. 1870 to 2000, investigated German efforts to invent more “natural” ways to eat and farm. Vegetarianism, organic farming, and other such practices have enticed a wide variety of Germans, from socialists, liberals, and radical anti-Semites in the 19th century to Nazis, communists, and Greens in the 20th century. The book brings together histories of science, medicine, agriculture, the environment, and popular culture to offer the most thorough treatment yet of this remarkable story. Professor Treitel is now working on a third book called Gesundheit! Seeking German Health, 1750–2000. It explores changing ideas and practices of health in German lands from the mid-18th century to the present and tracks their global history. Professor Treitel teaches courses in European history, the history of science and medicine, and medical humanities.

Julia Malitska: What were the connections and lines of division between occultists, life reformers, and vegetarians in Germany in the 19th and 20th centuries?

Corinna Treitel: I think of them all as being part of the life reform movement. Many occultists were vegetarians, but there were also many vegetarians who were not occultists and many occultists who were not vegetarians. For instance, in the first book I noted that almost all the German theosophists were vegetarians and I think that has to do with the connections to South Asia and Hinduism. All these reform movements are kind of cross fertilizing each other, and they often share personnel.

Julia Malitska: Why is it important to study the interplay of science, medicine, politics, and culture in German history?

Corinna Treitel: I think it’s an odd story. I never intended to be a historian. When I went to college, I studied chemistry and planned to do a PhD in biochemistry after I graduated. I was working in a lab. And instead, I started to get interested in the history of science. It was a field I knew almost nothing about. And I do not know if I could have put the feeling into words at that time, but I think what I was most interested in was the forms that modern belief takes in a scientific culture. The whole secularization thesis is that as religion recedes into the private sphere, rational forms of intellectual life take over. I was interested in what kind of opportunities a scientific age and robust scientific culture creates for belief and imagination. I was attracted to Germany as a kind of test case because Germany had such a robust scientific culture and also such a robust popular culture related to science. A lot of historians, at least in the United States, come to German history because they are interested in the Nazi past, which is a perfectly legitimate way to enter the field. But I actually came into it because of the rich 19th century German culture of high science and popular belief. It really fascinated me.

About why it’s important: I think of the German past as a kind of “laboratory of modernity”, to use a metaphor introduced by other researchers. I think of it as a place to study the intermingling of scientific ideas and popular beliefs, and the mutual influence of popular beliefs and scientific ideas on each other. That is something that you can see in many other places – probably in your own studies of the Russian empire. And there is a tendency, I think, among historians to assume that the history of science and the history of popular culture are two different things. I think that we miss something important about the modern condition if we do not study them together. Germany is a great place to do it, but I don’t claim anything exclusive there. The metaphor I use is that Germany is a Petri dish. That is my philosophy about this particular topic.
The image showing Hitler as a butcher is by John Heartfield: “Don’t Be Afraid – He’s a Vegetarian!” (1936). Heartfield was a visual artist very critical of Nazism. Here he was playing on the idea that all vegetarians are peace loving. In the image, Hitler the vegetarian is about to butcher the chicken, who is wearing the French cockade. Don’t be fooled by Hitler’s words, he is actually inviting the Versailles Peace Treaty. He may be a vegetarian in other words, but he is also bent on violence and aggression towards France. The reference in 1936 would have been to the re militarization of the Rhineland, a direct violation of the Versailles Treaty yet one which few contemporaries at the time saw as part of a large spiral of German aggression against her neighbors.

CT: What is the most fascinating case study and/or personality you have studied, or source that you have analyzed? What is your most unexpected discovery?

CT: I have had so many! I will just give you one example from each of one my projects. Working on the first book on occultism, I think the person who surprised me the most was actually a guy by the name of Carl du Prel,4 who was involved in things way beyond the kooky and fringe to the very center of German culture. That is why I came around to this idea of biopolitics. Biopolitics has been a huge thing for German historians talking about the Nazis; the racial hygiene programs, the Nazi anti-smoking campaigns, and so on. For German historians, biopolitics has always been very closely associated with fascist and top-down projects. I wanted to use this story of natural eating as a way of pushing back against that dominant narrative about biopolitics, that these biopolitical ideas about natural eating came from outside the scientific establishment, that they had big influence and multiple political afterlives from the fascists to social democrats. I was trying to shake up the way how historians, German historians, think about biopolitics.

JM: In my own research I was struck by a strong, almost exclusive, historiographic tradition of the association of vegetarianism in the Russian Empire with Tolstoyism. So there was nothing other than Tolstoyan vegetarians. When I told people around me that I was researching on vegetarianism in the Russian empire, the immediate comment was: “So you are studying Tolstoyans.” What were transnational and global influences on German vegetarians and life reformers? Where did they get their inspiration from?

CT: That is a question you can think about at least two levels. There were international vegetarian congresses where people met. Personal connections certainly occurred. Even early on, one of the first modern German vegetarians, Wilhelm Zimmermann,7 lived for a while in a vegetarian commune in England, so he had some British counterparts, and he helped get some of their material translated into German. So, there were those kinds of personal connections and international circulation of 19th-century reformers.

The other international factor in this story has to do with the globalization of the food system in the 19th century. I forget the exact numbers right now, but I think German meat consumption tripled between the early 19th and the early 20th century, and a lot of that was driven by importing of cheap meat from places like Argentina, the United States or Canada. That kind of globalization of the food system was distressing for many vegetarians, though not for all, because they were worried about an already losing control of their own food economy. I always say Germany was not such a great place to be self-sufficient in food. It was not like Ukraine, a breadbasket, or the United States or Canada that had the capacity to be very self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Germany was not that kind of place in the 19th century, so that fears about the globalization of the food system applied to a lot of people, not just vegetarians. So this is a little sense of a stimulus, I think, for many vegetarians and early organic farmers, to develop more natural ways to eat and farm.

JM: The history of vegetarian association activity dates back to 1867, when Eduard Baltzer founded the first German Association for the Natural Way of Life. Several other vegetarian associations developed after 1867. 1892 became a symbolic year in the history of vegetarianism in German-speaking Europe, marked by the establishment of the Leipzig-based German Vegetarian Federation. In the Weimar Republic, however, we can speak, as far as I know, of at least three parallel centers of vegetarianism – Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden. I believe there also were vegetarians in Switzerland, Poland, and Austria, which might have been part of these developments and organizations. How did these centers (co)operate and relate to each other? How fragmented and/or consolidated were German vegetarians?

CT: I cannot give you a good answer to that question because I did not really write a history of the vegetarian movement. There is another book that someone should write. And I would love to read it. I was more interested in the dream of eating naturally. But from what I did see, I would say that there was a fair amount of traffic. For instance, some people, such as Eduard Baltzer, were part of a national lecture circuit. They would travel around German giving lectures on why everyone should embrace the natural lifestyle and become a vegetarian. They would meet the same people who heard them speak in Leipzig and wrote to a friend to say that they should invite Baltzer. And Baltzer would come to speak in that other place. So, I think that there was a kind of informal network of people who knew each other, and they collaborated with each other and shared knowledge. And of course, they all published in the same journals, and were part of these international congresses. The other thing that I noticed is that vegetarianism seems to be a very urban phenomenon. Even in the kind of rural colonies where you see vegetarianism...
Vegetarianism was part of social reformism. Reformism came in many different political varieties. There was the anti-Semitic variety, the pacifist variety, the communist variety, the women’s rights variety, and so it got mixed up, to dominate? Did you find any traces of ideological conflicts?

CT: I think the answer is yes. I mean of course there were different kinds of vegetarians. It is probably similar to what you have seen in the Roman empire. Some came to vegetarianism through animal rights and antivivisection. Others, like Baltzer, I think, were more concerned with social justice and poverty, ensuring that all types of people had enough to eat in Germany, so their concern was more with hunger. Pacifism was sometimes part of it, but not always. And then there were physicians who came to the whole topic of eating naturally because they were concerned about hunger and hygiene. By the time the eugenicists and the racial hygienists came online in the 1930s and 1940s, they were interested in what vegetarianism could offer in maintaining a pure Germanic people. But I did see these guys all fighting with each other for dominance of the movement. As I said, I did not write a movement history, so it might be there and just I did not see it.

CT: Let me again start with insights from my own research and the context of the Russian empire. Vegetarianism as social activism started to a great extent, I would say, in the multi-ethnic provinces of the Russian empire, and particularly in the cities with a direct cultural and educational link to Central European metropolises. Kyiv, Odessa or St. Petersburg are excellent examples of that. Did ethnic/religious or gender aspects play a decisive role in the processes you study in the German context?

CT: In my source material starting from 1870s, I came across ideas of scientists, climatologists, and some other plants that should supposedly be introduced into people’s diet for a number of reasons, including environmental concerns and food economy justifications, I would say, to use the modern language. Are there any blank spots in the field of your research? What do we know less about? What would you like to know more about?

CT: I think it would be cool if a consortium of historians could work with each other to flesh out the international story of this topic, because all of us in the area are limited by our language skills, the peculiarities of the way our mind works and our training. This is actually a global story, and it is probably not just a Western story. I am sure that there are South Asian and East Asian dimensions. Going back to the earlier question about transnational connections, one of the big surprises for me was about the Japanese physicians who came to study in Germany. They got interested in the studies of vegetarian eaters as a way to try to justify their own East Asian diet as being a robust way to eat in the modern world. That was interesting. I did not expect to see Japanese people cropping up in German journals talking about vegetarianism. I think that kind of international story is still hidden. I do not know anyone who is working on it. In my fantasy world it would be so cool if we could maybe create a consortium of people trying to flesh out what that bigger story is. We have zoom now, so maybe it is even possible.

This is a great conclusion to our interview. Thank you, Corinna.

CT: Yes, now you can think about it. Maybe you will be the organizer.

Julia Malitska is PhD in History and Project Researcher at CEEES, Södertörn University.

Note: This text is based on an interview conducted on February 16, 2022.

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3 The Shiitish là a Laboratory equipment item, and the same enters popular culture. It is often used metaphorically for a contained community that is being studied as if they were microorganisms in a biology experiment, or an environment where original ideas and enterprises may flourish.
4 Karl Ludwig August Friedrich Maximilian Alfred, Friedrich vom Preußen, or, in French, Carl Ludwig August Friedrich Maximilian Alfred, Baron du Prel (1839—1899), was a German philosopher and writer on mysticism and the occult.
5 The Interpretation of Dreams (1893) is a book by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, in which the author introduces his theory of the unconscious with respect to dream interpretation and discusses what would later become the theory of the Oedipus complex.
6 Wilhelm Eduard Baltzer (1844—1887) was the founder of the first German vegetarian society, the German Natural Living Society, an early popularizer of science and much more. Coming from a family of Evangelical origin, he was educated at the universities of Leipzig and Halle where he chiefly studied theology. At Nordhausen, Thuringia, he founded a free religious community: Self-described religious humanists regard the humanist life stance as their religion and organise themselves using a congregational model.
7 Ballhaus Friedrich Wilhelm Zimmermann (1807—1889) was a German poet, historian, literary critic and politician.
8 Diet for a Small Planet is a 1971 bestselling book by Frances Moore Lappé.

Both German and imperial Russian vegetarians were already saying that in the 19th and early 20th century. I think we have forgotten that a lot of these arguments were already elaborated in much the same way by these people. I think that maybe he is not hidden but lasting outcome. Again, for organic farming, I do not know what the case is in other countries, but in the United States, a lot of people in academia are almost messianic about organic farming as the thing that is going to save the planet. And I am agnostic. People in academia also often think that organics is something that was invented in the 1970s by the hippies, and they are shocked when I say that the Nazis were very interested in organics. And there were people before the Nazis who were doing organic forms of farming as well. There is this forgotten past of people who created the techniques and the justifications and the whole philosophy around natural eating that I think we still are with us today.

CT: Yes, in my source material starting from 1870s, I came across ideas of scientists, climatologists, and geographers about ways in which other plants that should supposedly be introduced into people’s diet for a number of reasons, including environmental concerns and food economy justifications, I would say, to use the modern language. Are there any blank spots in the field of your research? What do we know less about? What would you like to know more about?

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