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Revealing the Volk:

Guido von List and the Religious Language of Radical Nationalism

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Introduction

German nationalism did not become pagan in any simple or mass sense. Around 1900, most German speakers still lived inside Christian institutions, and the central religious struggle in imperial Germany remained confessional rather than neo-pagan. Yet that is exactly what makes Guido von List important. His historical significance does not lie in founding a successful church or in providing a neat one-way road to National Socialism. It lies in the fact that he helped one radical wing of völkisch nationalism change register. In List's writings, the nation ceased to be only a political community or even only a cultural-historical Volk. It became the bearer of a buried sacred tradition, a tradition allegedly older than Christianity, preserved in signs, myths, and secret knowledge, and waiting to be reawakened.

The argument of my paper is therefore narrower, and sharper, than the claim that List was simply a "German pagan" thinker. List mattered because he presented radical nationalism not just as an ideology but as a recovered revelation. He did this in three linked ways. First, he treated runes and myths as evidence that the German people possessed a sacred pre-Christian truth beneath Christian history. Second, he claimed that this truth had been guarded by a hidden priestly elite, the Armanenschaft, which made the Volk into a hierarchically ordered spiritual community rather than a neutral public. Third, and most importantly, he cast himself as the revealer of that lost truth. This prophetic posture was not incidental. It was one reason his bad philology could nevertheless function politically. List's work did not create German nationalism, but it helped sacralize one radical nationalist current by making exclusion, hierarchy, and ancestral identity sound like revelation rather than argument.¹

From confessional nationalism to ethnoreligious myth

The background to List's intervention can be stated briefly. German nationalism in the late nineteenth century was burdened by a religious problem it never fully solved. As Helmut Walser Smith shows, imperial Germany was politically unified but culturally divided, and national culture was often imagined in Protestant terms even though Catholics formed a large and mobilized constituency.² The result was not a vacuum in any absolute sense, but a recurring pressure to align nation and religion more closely than confessional reality allowed. George L. Mosse's account of the mystical and anti-positivist revolt around 1900 helps explain what happened next. In this world, politics was increasingly fused with myth, nature, symbol, and an

¹ Petr Pytlik, "The Instrumentalization of the 'Tortured Artist Myth': The Birth of a Legend of the Völkisch Writer Guido List," *Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik* 37, no. 1 (2023): 70-71; George L. Mosse, "The Mystical Origins of National Socialism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (1961): 81-82.

² Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 15, 211-12.

imagined Aryan past. Nationalism could begin to operate not only as a political doctrine but as a kind of lived, quasi-sacred worldview.³

List entered precisely at this crossroad. Stefanie von Schnurbein traces the roots of later Germanic neopaganism to the *völkisch* milieu, where nationalism, anti-universalism, racial thinking, and enthusiasm for the “Germanic” or “Nordic” became part of one ideological field.⁴ List did not invent that field, but he gave it a particularly potent form. He did not merely complain that Christianity was foreign, Roman, or universal. He offered an alternative: a German nation that could think of itself as the surviving remnant of an ancient Aryan-Germanic sacred order.

List as revealer, not merely theorist

That point becomes clearer once List is approached not only as a thinker but also as a self-fashioned revealer. Petr Pytlik’s article is valuable here because it shifts the question away from whether List’s claims were persuasive scholarship. They were not. What mattered was that he and his followers increasingly cast him as a seer and prophet. Pytlik notes that already in his lifetime List was treated by admirers as a “seer and a prophet,” and that for his followers he became the type of a “misunderstood post-Romantic poet-seer” and a “seeing man among the blind.”⁵ That is not decorative biography. It helps explain the political form of List’s authority.

A nationalist writer can argue. A prophet reveals. That difference matters. If List had presented himself as one more historical interpreter of German antiquity, his eccentric etymologies and mythological reconstructions would have remained merely weak scholarship. But once he appeared as the discoverer of suppressed truth, his doctrine acquired a different status. It could ask for belief not because it met scholarly standards, but because it seemed to pierce through the blindness of the present into an older and truer Aryan order. In that sense Pytlik helps illuminate the mechanism of List’s influence better than a purely intellectual history can: his writings worked in part because they were framed as disclosure.

Jeffrey Lavoie’s discussion of List’s Wotanism and Armanism clarifies the structure of this disclosure. List’s teaching, Lavoie argues, divided into an exoteric and an esoteric level: a broader religious-mythic language for the people and a deeper gnosis reserved for the spiritually capable.⁶ The division itself is already political. It means that the nation is imagined not as a flat community of equal citizens but as a people with layers of access to truth. That structure becomes much clearer in List’s own primary texts.

³ Mosse, “Mystical Origins,” 81-86.

⁴ Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 14, 53.

⁵ Pytlik, “Instrumentalization,” 70-71.

⁶ Jeffrey D. Lavoie, “The Philosophy of Guido von List (1848-1919): Connecting Gnosticism to Nazism,” in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston (London: Routledge, 2018), 501, 504.

Runes and the racialization of sacred language

In *The Secret of the Runes*, List begins with what sounds at first like a technical complaint: too little attention has been paid to the runes. But the argument immediately exceeds philology. The runes, he says, are not ordinary letters but “wordsymbols of the prehistoric age,” and these ancient hieroglyphs, “rooted far back in the pre-Christian primeval age of Teuton- and even Aryan-dom, stand in full bloom today.”⁷ This is the basic Listian move in concentrated form. The Germanic past is not merely past. It survives, in hidden or misunderstood form, in the present. National identity therefore becomes an act of decipherment. One does not simply remember the ancestors – instead, one recovers their still-latent truth.

That formulation mattered historically because it changed the register of nationalist legitimacy. A nation justified by law, culture, or political memory can still be argued with. A nation justified by sacred signs appears deeper and older than politics. List was supplying nationalism with revelation.

The racial content of that revelation becomes fully visible in the Ka-rune section. There List interprets the world-tree Yggdrasill as the “Aryan tribal tree,” beside which the trees of other races appear as “foreign trees.” He then makes the political meaning explicit: “The tribe, the race, is to be purely preserved. It may not be defiled by the roots of the foreign tree.” The imperative conclusion is even blunter: “Your blood, your highest possession.”⁸ This is the point at which List’s symbolic system stops being a vague neo-pagan atmosphere and becomes demonstrably political. Sacred language is doing the work of racialization. Miscegenation is condemned not as a contingent social danger, but as a violation disclosed by primordial symbols.

That change of register is one of List’s real contributions to radical nationalism. He helped move exclusion from the level of preference and polemic to the level of sacral truth. Mosse’s analysis of the mystical origins of radical nationalist ideology helps explain why this mattered: myth and symbol made modern political claims feel anchored in cosmic and ancestral necessity.⁹ In List’s hands, race did not simply need protection. It needed ritual interpretation and sacred defense.

The Armanenschaft and the hieratic ordering of the Volk

The doctrine of the Armanenschaft is the point where List’s religious nationalism becomes structurally anti-democratic. In *The Armanen Society of the Ario-Germanics*, he insists that the Armanians were “the most important people of their nation” and that they were “teachers, priests and judges in one person.”¹⁰ That sentence is more revealing than many pages of secondary commentary. It shows that List did not imagine the ancient Germanic world as a spontaneous folk community. He imagined it as a sacred order ruled intellectually and spiritually by an elite.

⁷ Guido von List, *The Secret of the Runes*, trans. Stephen E. Flowers (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1988), 4.

⁸ List, *Secret of the Runes*, 12.

⁹ Mosse, “Mystical Origins,” 86-88.

¹⁰ Guido von List, *The Armanen Society of the Ario-Germanics* (1908; EPUB ed., Guido-List Library, n.d.), 10.

The claim is not only about the past. It is also about continuity. On another page, List argues that the pre-Christian Armanians possessed a “position of power” that the Christian priesthood in Germany “was never able to achieve,” and that this influence continued in the Christian era and still prepared the future “in a decisive manner.”¹¹ On the next page he sharpens the point even more: the Roman hierarchy had exercised a temporary foreign domination over the Aryan race-spirit, but it had not destroyed the “Armaneness working in secret.”¹² This is a political myth of enormous utility. Christianity becomes not simply a rival religion but a foreign hypnosis laid over the true spirit of the race. National restoration, accordingly, is not innovation but awakening.

Here the relationship between prophetic persona and doctrine becomes especially clear. If the truth has been preserved secretly for centuries, then the nation needs interpreters. It needs people who can name the hidden structure that ordinary believers have forgotten. List thus turns ethnonationalism into a hieratic project. The people are not enough by themselves. They require mediators, initiates, and guardians of the secret inheritance.

This is why the exoteric-esoteric split is so important. Near the close of the same text, List explains that the most essential part of Armanian esotericism was communicated “only to the most receptive of their fraternity,” while the wider people received myths and fairy tales as a more tangible religious teaching, only the most advanced were able to receive the “full light.”¹³ That is not just mystical color. It is a model of political culture. Truth is stratified. The people receive symbols. The elect receive knowledge. Once that structure is attached to race and nation, nationalism ceases to be merely participatory or cultural. It becomes pedagogical, initiatory, and fundamentally unequal.

Lavoie is helpful here because he shows that List’s Armanism was explicitly reserved for the more spiritually capable, while Wotanism served a broader exoteric function.¹⁴ But the decisive evidence is in List’s own language. The Armanenschaft was the means by which he transformed the Volk into a racial-spiritual body ordered by hidden authority. In that sense, he did more than revive Germanic religion. He sacralized hierarchy.

Why List mattered more than his readership

The obvious objection is that all of this remained marginal. List never commanded a mass following, and his writings were too eccentric to become the creed of the nation. That objection is partly right, but it misses the level on which List was historically effective. His importance was not quantitative. It was formal and transmissive.

First, List offered a usable repertoire. Runes, hidden priest-kings, ancestral revelation, Christian usurpation, blood as sacred inheritance: these were portable elements. They could circulate

¹¹ List, *Armanen Society*, 14.

¹² List, *Armanen Society*, 15.

¹³ List, *Armanen Society*, 22.

¹⁴ Lavoie, “Philosophy of Guido von List,” 504.

beyond the exact details of his doctrine. Goodrick-Clarke shows that the Guido-von-List Society, founded in 1908, promoted and financed his publications and that Listian ideas crossed into the German Reich through figures later involved in the Reichshammerbund and the Germanenorden.¹⁵ One need not accept a crude genealogy from List to Nazism to see the point. His language entered a broader völkisch environment in which race, myth, and anti-Christianism were already being recombined.

The historical effect becomes clearer once those carriers are named more concretely. Koehne shows that early Nazi discourse could still draw on recognizably Listian vocabulary: writers in the *Völkischer Beobachter* referred to the Armanen as an ancient Aryan priesthood, invoked *Halgadom* for supposedly primordial sacred sites, and treated Aryan religion as a cult of light and sun.¹⁶ The same article links Hitler's August 1920 speech on Aryan culture to Listian language about the sign of the sun and notes that List himself had connected the Quirl, the Fyrfos, and the swastika as related symbols of fire, sun, and communal origin.¹⁷ Koehne also observes that the *Halgadom* concept survived in the Germanic Order and the Thule Society, that is, in exactly the völkisch organizations through which esoteric nationalism moved from occult circles into the early nationalist right.¹⁸ This does not prove a simple chain of command from List to National Socialism. It does show something more historically defensible: List helped furnish a symbolic and narrative toolkit that later groups could activate, simplify, and radicalize.

Second, List's specific form of sacralization mattered. A comparison with Lanz von Liebenfels helps here, provided it is kept precise. Lanz could be more explicit and biologically grotesque. In *Theozoology*, he writes, "God is purified race!" and imagines divinity imprisoned in an "apeman-husk."¹⁹ The racism is naked. But precisely for that reason, it is less culturally supple. List's formula was often more adaptable because it embedded racial exclusion in rune symbolism, ancestral myth, and hidden continuity. He made radical nationalism sound less like laboratory delirium and more like a revelation of buried German truth. That difference is one reason List mattered more as a cultural mediator even when Lanz could be more extreme.

Third, List helped push one wing of nationalism away from the still-confessional solutions that had dominated the nineteenth century. Smith's work remains important here mostly as a limit case. He shows how much German nationalism had long tried to nationalize religion from within Christianity.²⁰ List represents something more radical. He made it possible to imagine that the

¹⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004), 54-57.

¹⁶ Samuel Koehne, "Were the National Socialists a 'Völkisch' Party? Paganism, Christianity, and the Nazi Christmas," *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 766, 780.

¹⁷ Koehne, "Were the National Socialists a 'Völkisch' Party?," 774-75.

¹⁸ Koehne, "Were the National Socialists a 'Völkisch' Party?," 780; Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 54-57.

¹⁹ Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, *Theozoology; or, The Science of the Sodomite Apelings and the Divine Electron*, Biblical Documents 1 (n.p.: Europa-House for Biblical Studies, n.d.), 77, 82.

²⁰ Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*, 15, 211-12.

national religion worth recovering was not a purified Christianity at all, but a specifically Aryo-Germanic order that Christianity had only overlaid and distorted.

Schnurbein's account of the Guido-von-List Society is useful because it shows that List's significance was not confined to private reading. The society promoted his ideas and financed his publications, while the minuscule circle of initiates around Armanism supplied exactly the kind of inner-outer structure that later volkisch and neo-pagan groups would find attractive.²¹ In this sense, List's importance lies less in founding a mass religion than in helping create a model: myth for the people, gnosis for the elect, race for the ground of both.

Legacy and conclusion

List's place in the history of German nationalism should therefore be stated clearly but with limits. He did not paganize Germany. He did not replace Christianity in public life. And later National Socialist religiosity remained heterogeneous, as Samuel Koehne has shown: pagan, Christian, and hybrid positions coexisted rather than marching in ideological lockstep.²² But none of that makes List trivial.

His significance lies in form. He helped turn one radical current of volkisch nationalism into an ethno-religious style of politics. He made the nation appear as the vessel of a suppressed sacred truth, he made race legible through symbol and revelation, and he gave hierarchy a myth of hidden priestly continuity. In that form, nationalism no longer needed to present itself chiefly as a program or a confession. It could present itself as an awakening.

This is also why Pytlik's emphasis on persona belongs at the center of the argument rather than at its edge. List's system was not powerful because it was intellectually rigorous. It was powerful, within its milieu, because revelation and self-mythologization compensated for weak scholarship. The revealer could say what the scholar could not prove. That is one reason his work mattered for the evolution of radical nationalism. It offered not only content but a way of authorizing content.

Seen in that light, List's historical effect becomes more concrete. He did not create the volkisch movement, but he helped teach part of it how to sound sacred. He furnished a vocabulary in which blood became destiny, myth became evidence, and politics became the recovery of a violated ancestral order. That vocabulary proved portable enough to reappear in newspapers, ritual language, and political symbolism well beyond List's own circle, even when his full doctrine was ignored or rewritten.²³ That was not the only direction German nationalism could take. But it was one of the directions it did take, and Guido von List helped give it its distinctive religious form.

²¹ Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 53; Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 54-56.

²² Samuel Koehne, "Were the National Socialists a 'Völkisch' Party? Paganism, Christianity, and the Nazi Christmas," *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 762-63.

²³ Koehne, "Were the National Socialists a 'Völkisch' Party?," 774-75, 780.

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