



# In Search of Purity: German-Speaking Vegetarians and the Lure of India (1833–1939)

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That vegetarianism has long been examined from a national perspective (Klein 2008) is also true of German vegetarianism (Barlösius 1997; Baumgartner 1992; Fritzen 2006; Treitel 2017). For a long time, scholars have seen vegetarianism as an integral part of the life reform movement, which aimed to renew society, if not humankind, by regenerating the individual, and which was seen as unique to German-speaking Europe (Buchholz 2001; Kerbs 1998; Krabbe 1974; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2004). Recent research, however, has questioned this view on the grounds that references to alimentary patterns elsewhere were central to vegetarianism and that vegetarians forged contacts with like-minded protagonists in other parts of the world (Hauser 2018, 2020). Eventually, India became an important protagonist in its own right in internationally organized

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vegetarianism, which from the mid-nineteenth century onwards originated in Europe and North America (Hauser 2021).

In British vegetarianism, India has been a major point of reference—not only because of colonialism but also because India was portrayed as the heartland of vegetarianism, a country with a long, seemingly unbroken, and universally embraced tradition of abstaining from meat (Stuart 2006). This image was certainly problematic. First, India was a subcontinent of many religions, some of which, especially Christianity and Islam, did not require their followers to abstain from meat. Second, however, not even all Hindus embraced vegetarianism. Vegetarianism was long a marker of social distinction for Brahmins, the members of the highest caste, widows, and male youths (Roy 2015). Those who did not practice it were considered impure, and were socially ostracized and subject to violence.<sup>1</sup> Vegetarianism came to be challenged under British colonial rule, often because vegetarian diet was considered responsible for the alleged lack of masculinity among Hindu men (Sinha 1995). Nonetheless, the ‘merciful Hindoo’ figure loomed large in the British vegetarian imagination.

In this chapter I argue that India, or rather the idea of Aryanism, was closely tied to one of the main goals of the vegetarian movement in the West, namely regenerating humankind or—more often—specific branches of it. Hinduism, which I discuss by analysing Gustav Struve’s novel *Mandaras Wanderungen* (1843), was only evoked at the beginning. Struve dwelt on the alleged shared Aryan heritage of Hindus and Germans, but deemed the former morally superior. Aryanism remained important in debates on German vegetarianism, over which theosophy came to exercise a major influence, but became increasingly detached from Hinduism and the Indian subcontinent. It had at first been tied to Buddhism, but then embraced new religious trends and the *völkisch* movement, which moved it farther away from India, though both philosophies appropriated aspects of Brahmin and related thought. These branches of the vegetarian movement argued that Aryan purity could be regained through diet and eugenics. On the other hand, as I show in the final part of this chapter, there were German vegetarians who, rather than being taken with Aryanism, were interested in the Indian independence movement. They saw Gandhi as the model ascetic vegetarian leader that crisis-shaken Europe needed,

<sup>1</sup>While there is little historical research on food, caste, and violence, autobiographies written by lower-caste people (Dalits) from the twentieth century render a vivid impression of this type of discrimination. See, for instance, Rege (2006) and Valmiki (2003).

and that some would soon find in Hitler. Only a few German-speaking vegetarians had direct contact with protagonists in India, but even they were not immune to misunderstanding their interlocutors' agendas. By and large, the relationships of German vegetarians with India were far more complex and less direct, yet no less meaningful, than those of their British counterparts. India and Aryanism seemed to embody the lost purity that German vegetarians hoped to regain through diet and physical exertion.

### INDIA AND GERMAN *VORMÄRZ* VEGETARIANISM

The first major work on ethical vegetarianism appeared in the tumultuous period of the early- to mid-1840s (*Vormärz*) when German radicals were beginning to call for a unified German nation and the reform, if not abolition, of the monarchy (Blackbourn 1998: 120–137; Hewitson 2010: 29–63). It was also the first German-speaking work on vegetarianism to draw inspiration from India. Its author, Gustav Struve (1805–70), was a radical democrat lawyer, writer, and central protagonist in the 1848 revolutions in Baden (Hank 2003; Peiser 1973; Reiß 2004). The protagonist in Struve's *Mandaras Wanderungen* (*Mandara's Travels*) is a young Brahmin who undertakes an educational journey to Germany (Struve 1843: 21) and is interned in a German prison for not having the right papers, where he dies because he refuses to eat the non-vegetarian food served to him (Struve 1843: 240–84). Before that, he holds up a mirror to German society, which he finds disturbing: People bow to statues of Christ on the cross, punish criminals with the death penalty, and eat the flesh of animals. These customs, or so he tells his interlocutors, are unknown in his native India where nobody eats meat (Struve 1843: 7–8, 54–8, 62–3, 73–4, 87–102, 280–84), venerates images, or embraces polytheism (Struve 1843: 7, 8, 24). When a Jesuit tries to convert him to Christianity, he stresses that he cannot convert to a religion that condones murder (Struve 1843: 7–8, 25–38). Animals, according to Mandara, are sentient beings and, as such, have a right to life. Moreover, human bodies are not equipped to digest the flesh of animals. Even if humans had nothing else to eat, it would be better for them to die than to commit injustice (Struve 1843: 62–3).

*Mandara's Travels*, which promotes vegetarianism motivated by compassion for non-human animals, centres on a protagonist from an India that conspicuously resembles Germany. Indeed, Struve was the German

vegetarian who most emphasized this alleged proximity. Well before South Asian and European authors identified ‘Aryanism’ as the alleged common origin of high-caste Hindus and Europeans (Figueira 2002; McGetchin 2009, 2017; Poliakov 1974; Pollock 1993; Thapar 2006), Struve (1843: 6) described his protagonist Mandara as a ‘tall and slender youth of noble features’. Although initially introduced as ‘exotic-looking’, Struve (1843: 6–7) soon emphasized his blue eyes, luscious blonde curls, and fair skin. Mandara thus simultaneously appears both exotic and German—he even sports the feathered hat characteristic of the German radical democrats of the 1830s and 1840s (Bausinger 2011).

Struve’s book placed India and Germany in close proximity. According to Marc Cluet, Struve borrowed this idea from the renowned German geographer Carl Ritter (1779–1859) (Cluet 2007; Vantard 2004). Ritter, for his part, had been influenced by William Jones’s discovery of the common roots of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, and the ensuing theories of the common descent of Europeans and Indians put forward by August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), who argued that ‘Aryans’—a term borrowed from the *Vedas* that initially signified elevated social status rather than linguistic or ‘racial’ identity—had invaded Europe from India (Poliakov 1974: 183–245). From this perspective, Hindu civilization had once been superior to its European counterpart, and in Struve’s book it still was. As Romila Thapar (2006) shows, through the writings of Max Müller and the Theosophical Society, Hindu nationalists would soon subscribe to this theory. Struve’s novel, however, did not resonate in India and, indeed, was never published in any language other than German.

Struve’s version of India was a peculiar one. Apparently, he was unaware that vegetarianism in India was an elite phenomenon solely practised by Brahmins, and that it was often tied to discrimination against those who did not practice it—lower-caste and casteless people, Christians, and Muslims. Throughout the book, Struve never quoted from Hindu texts, such as the *Code of Manu*, that justified caste hierarchies and thereby promoted stark social inequality through diet.<sup>2</sup> Struve was a revolutionary

<sup>2</sup> Jones’s edition of the *Code of Manu* appeared in English in 1796, and in a German translation the following year (Gesetzbuch 1797; Jones 1796). Even if Struve did not know these works themselves, he might have encountered them in Friedrich Schlegel’s (1808) *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians), which makes ample reference to Manu.

who, while ready to take up arms for his cause, regarded India as the epitome of an equal, non-violent society. Vegetarianism appeared to him as the very centrepiece of that peaceful equality—even although it was far from being so.

### INDIAN CONNECTIONS WITH GERMAN THEOSOPHISTS

Struve's focus on India was unusual in German vegetarianism, for although treatises on vegetarianism usually mentioned India in passing, references to the subcontinent were rarely seen in German vegetarian magazines. However, all this began to change when Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, especially once the organization established its headquarters in Adyar, Madras, in 1879. Its aim was to find a synthesis between what its founders considered the world's main religions and present-day science, above all evolutionary theory (Godwin 2013; Santucci 2012; Viswanathan 2013).

From the beginning, the Theosophical Society was a transnational organization, counting not only Russians and Americans, but also British, Austrian, and Indian fellows, almost exclusively high-caste Hindus, among its members (on its Indian members, see Moritz 2009, 2012; Mukhopadhyay 2019, 2021). Initially, it put itself under the spiritual guidance of Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824–83), a religious reformer and founder of the *Arya Samaj* (Fischer-Tiné 2012; Jones 1976). Dayanand and his organization were eager to re-establish Hindu supremacy in India and thereby return to the golden age when so-called *Aryas* were believed to have conquered the subcontinent (Jordens 1960: 509–12; Sarda 1946: 525–6; van der Veer 2001: 55–7; 75–6).<sup>3</sup> Dayanand Saraswati also actively campaigned for the protection of cattle, whose existence he saw as threatened by the Muslim and British presence in India (Adcock 2010; De 2019; Dharampal-Frick and Sitharaman 2015; Freitag 1980; O'Toole 2003). While he saw both the British and Muslims as enemies of a Hindu nation in the making, he characterized Muslims as particularly loathsome and cruel (Saraswati 1889: 28–37). While the Theosophical Society did not force its members to embrace vegetarianism, its publications established a close link between a diet free from meat, alcohol, and

<sup>3</sup>The letters exchanged between Dayanand, Olcott and Blavatsky are reprinted in Saraswati (2015).

other stimulants, and the idea of spiritual progress (Blavatsky 1883, 1889: 260–2, 1890).

The Theosophical Society, which soon established chapters in other countries, including Germany, attracted individuals who subscribed to the idea that meat abstinence furthered spiritual enlightenment. While these connections have been little researched so far, some of its German members clearly forged contacts with Hindu fellows of the Theosophical Society, a case in point being the *Internationaler Verein zur Bekämpfung der wissenschaftlichen Tierfolter* (International Association for Combatting the Scientific Torture of Animals). Contrary to what its name suggests, the association only had one chapter, which was German, although some of its members hailed from well beyond Germany. Its only published membership roster (*Internationaler Verein zur Bekämpfung der wissenschaftlichen Tierfolter* 1889) listed several upper-caste Bengali Hindus in addition to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. In all likelihood, its founder, Paul Förster (1844–1925), was a member of the Theosophical Society. Förster was, however, also a professed anti-Semite, who had initiated a petition to the Reichstag calling for the abolition of the legal emancipation of German Jews, and campaigning, like many vegetarians and animal welfare activists, against Jewish practices of slaughter (Zerbel 1999). It may hint at an overlap of convictions to state that Förster’s *International Organization*, a body with several Hindu members, was founded at a time when anti-Semitism was surging in Germany, and when the cow protection movement in India had begun to erupt into anti-Muslim violence. In any case, both Hindu and German anti-Semitic vegetarians like Förster defined themselves as ‘Aryan’, although the respective connotations of this term varied.

Another theosophist who established connections with India was Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), a German economist and colonial activist who travelled there to seek spiritual enlightenment between 1894 and 1896 (Moritz 2014). Hübbe-Schleiden believed that the subcontinent was peopled by ‘Eastern Aryans’, who were intellectually and culturally inferior to their alleged Western brethren (Hübbe-Schleiden 2009: 215). Despite the alleged superiority of what he considered his own race, he felt that he needed regeneration. Thus, while on the subcontinent, he not only placed himself under the guidance of Hindu gurus and a prominent Austrian author on vegetarianism who was living in Calcutta, but also sought to further his spiritual development by consuming *ganja* (marihuana) and abstaining from meat—or at least making an attempt to

do so. In the end, however, he could not refrain from eating meat and returned to Germany without realizing his spiritual aims (Hübbe-Schleiden 2009: 323, 343, 385–6, 424, 435, 471, 531, 541).

### GERMAN BUDDHISTS ON THE SUBCONTINENT

Members of the Theosophical Society interacted with both Hindus and Buddhists, with Olcott and Blavatsky eventually embracing Buddhism. On the other hand, some Buddhists also joined the Theosophical Society. One of them, Don David Hevavitharane (1864–1933), left the society to reform and revive his own religion, and soon founded an association known as the Maha Bodhi Society (Blackburn 2010: 104–42; Brekke 2002: 86–115; Gombrich 2006: 186–94; 97, 110–13; Saroja 1992). Buddhist reform became known to a wider Western audience in the wake of the World Parliament of Religions conducted during the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in which Hevavitharane, now called Anagarika Dharmapala, participated (Bartholomeusz 1993; Moritz 2016).

In Germany, Buddhism had met with growing interest since Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) praise of it (Zotz 2000). In contrast to Hinduism, which at the time did not attract German converts, Buddhism seemed more attractive, being considered a philosophy rather than a religion. By the end of the nineteenth century, some German intellectuals claimed allegiance to it (Myers 2013). In Leipzig, a German chapter of the Maha Bodhi Society came into being (Bigalke 2016: 235–46; Bigalke and Neef 2008). Some German Buddhists also went to Ceylon to be initiated as monks (Hecker 1995: 18–29). Although Buddhism never completely ruled out meat consumption and even reformist Buddhism remained ambivalent on it, some German Buddhists stressed the close connection between Buddhism and vegetarianism.

One such person was Ludwig Ankenbrand (1888–1971), an ardent advocate of animal welfare, who saw Buddhism as the religion best reconcilable with the diverse aims of the German life reform movement. Ankenbrand, a sharp critic of Christianity, to him a religion that was both Semitic and materialist, claimed Buddhism to be the most Aryan of the religions (Albrecht 2016; Ankenbrand 1911). Unlike most Germans fascinated with the religion, Ankenbrand, his wife Lisbeth,<sup>4</sup> and a group of friends visited Ceylon as part of a round the world trip begun in 1912.

<sup>4</sup>Her dates are unknown.

The trip ended in disaster, with one member of the group suffering from a mental breakdown and the others being interned during the First World War (Ankenbrand 1913, 1920). During his internment, Ankenbrand edited a newspaper for the inmates at the German camp, with the articles he submitted to it hinting at a negative perception of Hindus while idealizing Ceylonese Buddhists (Ankenbrand 1914a, b, c, 1915a, b, c). On his return, Ankenbrand remained committed to both Buddhism and vegetarianism, while also interacting with the Ahmadiyya community in Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

### ARYANISM WITHOUT HINDUS: MAZDAZKAN

Reformist Buddhism was not the only way in which German vegetarians, hoping to regenerate their alleged Aryan identity, came into contact with the Indian subcontinent. There were other, more obscure paths. One of them was Mazdazkan, a community founded in Chicago in the wake of the World Columbian Exposition. Its founder, Otto Hanisch (1856–1936), was a German migrant from Silesia, who pretended to be the son of the Russian ambassador to Persia and to have been raised by Tibetan monks. It was his expressed intention to restore Zoroastrianism. Mazdazkan focused on systematic breathing, exercise, sexual practices, and vegetarianism, all of which were believed to enhance racial evolution (Bigalke 2016: 188–215; Graul 2013; Krabbe 1974: 73–7; Linse 2001, 2005; Stausberg 2004: 378–401, 2007; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2004: 153–63). Mazdazkan, which was strongly influenced by the Theosophical Society, Brahmin and Jain notions of purity, and yoga as refashioned by Swami Vivekananda, never in fact acknowledged these influences, but instead stressed its alleged Zoroastrian qualities. Mazdazkan hierarchized six races based on skin tone, with the white or Aryan one at the top. Following a pure lifestyle without meat, the members of the white race were considered to have the potential to develop further into the ‘race transparent’. Yet, Mazdazkan’s notion of Aryanism differed from that of the Theosophical Society in one significant respect: Hindus were not considered Aryans. Instead, Arabs and Zoroastrians were included in this seemingly elect race (Ammann 1914).

<sup>5</sup>State Archives of Baden-Württemberg (Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart). Sonderbestand 8600. Autographensammlung Ankenbrand. S. M. Abdullah to Ludwig Ankenbrand, Berlin-Wilmersdorf, 21. September 1929. H. Mazooruddin Ahmad to Ludwig Ankenbrand, Berlin-Friedenau, 24. September 1942.



Mazdaznan's obscure teachings struck a chord among the upper-middle classes in the United States, and the religion soon spread not only to Canada but also to Britain, Germany, and Switzerland. Leipzig, which was the centre of German Buddhism, also became the centre of Mazdaznan until its leader in Germany, Swiss-born David Ammann (1855–1923), was expelled from Saxony for indecency in 1914, at which point Mazdaznan's German-speaking headquarters were moved to Herrliberg near Zurich (Graul 2012, 2013: 240–7). Yet, although the German authorities eyed the group with suspicion and mainstream German vegetarians derided it, German vegetarian magazines continued to carry advertisements for products such as underwear, cosmetics, and health foods that Mazdaznan members marketed. Mazdaznan was also promoted at the Bauhaus, most notably by the painter Johannes Itten (1888–1967), who was elevated to a leading position in the community (Schmitz 1999; Wagner 2005, 2009).

Mazdaznan had already started trying to set up personal connections with Parsis in India on the eve of the First World War, but they were few and far between.<sup>6</sup> However, neither the German nor Swiss vegetarian magazines ever portrayed the group as in any way influenced by the sub-continent. Indeed, Mazdaznan itself masked its indebtedness to these influences by vaguely referring to its alleged roots as the Arab-speaking 'Orient'—a region that had long fascinated German-speaking vegetarians—rather than India (Hauser 2018). Although abolished by the Nazi regime, in the 1950s Mazdaznan again became influential in organized vegetarian circles, including in Germany, when Gloria (Maude) Gasque, a high-ranking US Mazdaznan member, became president of the International Vegetarian Union from 1953 until her death in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

### VÖLKISCH VEGETARIANISM: CLAIMS TO TEUTONIC SUPERIORITY

While Aryanism originally emerged as a concept that stressed ties between India and Europe, some German-speaking vegetarians captivated by their Aryanism laid strong emphasis on their supposed Teutonic heritage. In fact, those connected to the *völkisch* movement conceived of Aryanism as more or less congruent with anything Teutonic. What they shared with

<sup>6</sup>In 1911, two Parsi priests allegedly praised Hanish's understanding of Zoroastrianism (Shirmad 1911; Sirkaris 1911).

<sup>7</sup>See <https://ivu.org/members/council/Maude-gasque.html>. Accessed 31 January 2023.

theosophy, neo-Buddhism, and Mazdaznan, however, was the belief that vegetarianism was an apt instrument with which to heighten their supposedly Aryan racial purity. As a result, this branch of the movement was relatively large, so cannot be discussed at any great length here.

One of the first vegetarians to represent this branch of the movement was Bernhard Förster (1843–1889), Paul Förster’s brother. Bernhard, while sharing his brother’s anti-Semitism, was not taken with Paul’s fascination for India. Instead, Bernhard’s Aryanism was a pronouncedly German one. Far from wishing to confine his field of action to Germany, Bernhard Förster advocated migrating to South America and, in the late 1880s, he publicized his plan to found a vegetarian colony in Paraguay by the name of Nueva Germania, to which only Germans of supposedly pure Aryan stock were to be admitted. In South America, they would be able to settle on virgin land, which offered far healthier conditions for regenerating the race than industrializing Europe could provide (Starker 1888). Although energetically supported by his wife, Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) sister Elisabeth (1846–1935), Förster’s plan came to naught. By 1891, he was on the edge of bankruptcy and the colony was riven by conflict (Kraus 2008). Only a few of the colonists embraced vegetarianism and the Försters themselves supplemented their income by selling fresh and cured meat, as well as alcohol, to the inhabitants of Nueva Germania. Needless to say, they also consumed these foods themselves (Klingbeil 1889: 33–4, 39, 49, 61–2, 65).<sup>8</sup> In 1891, Förster died by committing suicide in a hotel room in Nueva Baviera, another German colony in Paraguay (Kraus 2009; Meinecke 1889).

In 1906, Willibald Hentschel (1858–1947), an avowed anti-Semite and anti-feminist (Pelger 2017; Puschner 2011, 2013), put forward another proposal to establish an ‘Aryan’ vegetarian settlement. Like many other protagonists of the life reform movement, he believed that the ‘Aryan’ race was in decay because of industrialization, the women’s movement, and the preponderance of meat, alcohol, and tobacco in the modern diet (Hentschel 1910: 37, 59–66, 77–84). Above all, however, he held Judaism and Christianity principally responsible for the downfall, particularly Christianity, which because of its stress on monogamy, offered men too little opportunity to exercise their reproductive potential (Hentschel 1910: 96, 1918: 155). It was through deliberate breeding that the ‘Aryan’

<sup>8</sup>See also Goethe und Schiller Archiv, Weimar: GSA 72/1478 f. Nueva Germania, Fleisch-Buch.

race (whose origins Hentschel located on the shores of the Baltic and North Sea rather than in the Himalayas) had become great. Vishnu, the grandson of Varuṇa, the Hindu god of creation, had been given 16,000 wives (Hentschel 1918: 183–4), and the ancient Teutons had killed their opponents to take their wives (Hentschel 1910: 27). Accordingly, Hentschel proposed rural settlements, called Mittgart after the abode of the gods in Teutonic mythology, that were to be composed of 1000 women and 100 men each. In these ‘human gardens’, men and women were to live separately, with the men residing jointly in a manor while the women stayed in cottages. Marriages, decided upon by a male council of elders, were to be dissolved when women got pregnant, with men moving on to the next marriage while women had to wait at least two and a half years (Hentschel 1906). The inhabitants were to sustain themselves through agriculture and to follow a vegetarian diet. This did not mean that Hentschel opposed violence: Indeed, he approved of murder between men as a means of racial selection (Hentschel 1906: 14). His utopia never materialized on the scale he had envisaged, but it likely exerted some influence on the Nazi *Lebensborn* project (Puschner 2013: 162).

Walter Sommer (1887–1985), a vegetarian (or in today’s terms, a raw vegan)<sup>9</sup> and youth leader based in Hamburg and mainly active in the 1930s, likewise embraced a concept of Aryanism that traced the Germans’ origins back to the Teutons. According to him, the Teutons were the chosen people in world history. They had been able to reach hegemony well beyond Europe because of their land law, which made land common property and which the Teutons used wisely to cultivate fruit, vegetables, nuts, and grains, thus achieving autarchy, and eventually military, moral, and intellectual superiority without harming animals (Sommer 1933a). Although Sommer held that diet influenced the character, an idea central to Hindu scriptures (Sommer 1928), he sharply criticized the fascination with India that was so common among German vegetarians (Sommer 1933b).

<sup>9</sup> On Walter Sommer’s notion of diet, see Sommer (1924).

## GERMAN VEGETARIANS AND THE CULT OF THE ASCETIC LEADER IN WEIMAR GERMANY

While some German vegetarians were fascinated with India and the idea of Aryanism and some only with the latter, others came to be attracted to the subcontinent without succumbing to Aryanism. It was above all Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), the Indian independence fighter, who impressed these German vegetarians. This fascination was connected to a growing feeling that only a strong ascetic leader could save crisis-shaken Weimar Germany.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1920s, some aspects of German vegetarianism developed strong affinities with ideas that would later characterize Nazi rule, including support for strong male leadership and hierarchy. Vegetarians on both the left and right articulated these tendencies in different contexts. While the *Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund* (ISK) fought Nazism, the *Vegetarische Presse* lent increasingly more support to the Nazi party, yet both stressed the importance of an ascetic male leader.

The ISK, founded in 1925 by Leonard Nelson (1882–1927), professor of philosophy at the University of Göttingen, and Minna Specht (1879–1961), an educator, objected to the Nazis' economic policy and their anti-Semitism (ISK 1930), but was less bothered about their anti-democratic tendencies. Nelson favoured hierarchy topped by a male leader (Nelson 1920a, b), and the ISK was hierarchically structured. Required to subordinate their whole life to the cause, ISK members were to donate a major part of their income to the movement, embrace celibacy and vegetarianism, abstain from alcohol and tobacco, and regularly confess their failings to each other—principles that Nelson considered central to his concept of *Führererziehung*, education for (male hierarchic) leadership (Lindner 2006: 30–6; see also Eicher 1926; Nelson 1920a: 17).<sup>11</sup>

The figure of the ascetic leader appealed equally to vegetarians with right-wing leanings. We can see this in the *Vegetarische Presse*, the journal of the German Vegetarian Union, which turned to a cult of leadership

<sup>10</sup>For more on this, see my forthcoming article “The Birth of the Ascetic Leader. Die Botschaft des Mahatma Gandhi in Troubled Weimar Germany.” In *Nodes of Translation. Rethinking Modern Intellectual History between Modern India and Germany*, edited by Martin Christof-Füchsle and Razak Khan, 195–220. Berlin: DeGruyter Oldenbourg, 2024.

<sup>11</sup>As testimonies of ISK members preserved in Nelson's papers show, many of them had difficulty accepting or following through with these principles. Bundesarchiv. Leonard Nelson Papers. N 2210/258.

early on. Its articles focused on outstanding male figures, usually historical advocates of vegetarianism, including philosophers, writers, artists, (rarely) statesmen, or prominent present-day advocates (Förster 1926, 1932a, b). It was in this context that the *Vegetarische Presse* reported on India and Gandhi, depicting the latter as a strong leader rather than as an advocate of non-violence. In 1930, an article emphasized that Gandhi ‘did not shy away from any consequence, not even from revolution, indeed from combat’, preferring ‘the use of violence ... over the whole race being enslaved’ (Albrecht 1930). However, Gandhi was soon replaced in the *Vegetarische Presse* by another ascetic vegetarian leader. In 1932, its editor explicitly called on German vegetarians to vote for the Nazi party (Förster 1932c, d), considering a vegetarian head of state as a victory for the vegetarian cause (Förster 1932d; Rothe 1931). In 1933, the journal enthusiastically welcomed Hitler’s rise to power, interpreting it as a major step towards a vegetarian world order (Förster 1932e; Förster and Buck 1932).

### CONTACTS WITH THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Most German-speaking vegetarians who admired Gandhi never encountered him or any other representatives of the Indian independence movement. Two renowned vegetarians, however, did indeed encounter protagonists fighting for an end to colonial rule in India, namely Werner Zimmermann (1893–1982) and Magnus Schwantje (1877–1959).

Zimmermann, who was born near Berne in 1893, was the son of a factory worker. After training to become a teacher, in 1919 he travelled to the United States on a shoestring with a view to ‘building character’ and witnessing workers’ living conditions (Zimmermann 1921: 7). In 1929, he travelled around the world, visiting North and South America, Japan, China, India, and the Middle East (Zimmermann 1930, 1937). Another journey after the Second World War followed much the same route (Zimmerman 1950). On both his trips around the world, Zimmermann visited Gandhi’s ashram in Sevagram, yet never found him at home. Despite his enthusiasm for Gandhi, Zimmermann was uninterested in Hinduism<sup>12</sup> but drew his inspiration from Taoism instead, which he considered a philosophy of non-interference akin to Gandhi’s notion of

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, he was highly critical of Mazdaznan, associating it not with Zoroastrianism, but with intellectual dishonesty (Zimmermann 1927a).

*satyagraha* (quest for truth).<sup>13</sup> In reality, the two were quite different. Gandhi's notion of freedom focused on *swaraj* (self-rule)—a term that simultaneously encompassed the ability to govern one's urges and, his ultimate aim, India's self-rule (Banerjee 2020: 68–76; Slate 2019: 55). This was quite different from Zimmermann's position, which was essentially about vegetarianism, economic reform, nudism, and sexual freedom.<sup>14</sup> During their only encounter, which took place during Gandhi's sojourn in Europe in 1931, the Swiss vegetarian tried to inform the Mahatma about his notion of freedom, but Gandhi, obviously bored, fell asleep in the middle of the conversation. Despite their obvious differences, Zimmermann became the main authority on Gandhi among German vegetarians and lectured extensively about him in the 1930s and again in the 1950s (Zimmermann 1931a, b).<sup>15</sup>

Magnus Schwantje, a German vegetarian, animal rights activist, and pacifist, had been interested in India, particularly Buddhism since his youth (Brucker 2010: 272). However, it was only in the interwar era that Schwantje met Indian activists and befriended M. P. T. Acharya (1887–1954), an anti-colonial activist in Berlin. Like Schwantje, Acharya considered himself an anarcho-pacifist.<sup>16</sup> Most likely, both met at the Theosophical Society (afas 1950a, 1952, 1956). Through Acharya, Schwantje developed an interest in Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle (Vegetarischen Presse 1931). Later, when Schwantje was in exile in Switzerland, Acharya informed him of the protest against animal sacrifices in Hindu temples organized by a young Brahmin called Ram Chandra Sharma (1909–2009). Fascinated by his commitment, Schwantje began publishing articles and leaflets about him, and both exchanged several letters in 1937 and 1938 (Schwantje 1937).<sup>17</sup> Ram Chandra borrowed Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*, non-violent resistance, for his campaigns.

<sup>13</sup>Zimmermann translated a Belgian scholar's work on Taoism into German (Borel 1933).

<sup>14</sup>Zimmermann translated Alice Bunker Stockham's work on birth control through continence (Stockham 1925). He also wrote books on free love and nudism (Zimmermann 1923a, b, 1927b).

<sup>15</sup>Zimmermann remained a popular speaker at German vegetarian congresses in the 1950s (Zimmermann 1951, 1955a, b).

<sup>16</sup>'Anarchist' was a term Acharya (2019) used to describe his political positions – originally published in the newspaper, *The Road to Freedom*, 3 (1), 1 September 1926, 5–6.

<sup>17</sup>For contemporary Indian accounts of Ram Chandra's fast, see 'Fast to stop animal sacrifice', *Times of India*, 26 September 1935, 3; 'Pandit Ram Chandra Sharma's fast for stopping animal sacrifice,' *Modern Review* LVIII, no. 4 (1935): 482–3; 'Rabindranath Tagore and Pandit Ram Chandra Sharma's fast,' *Modern Review* LVIII, no. 4 (1935): 484.

However, although Ram Chandra used Gandhi's methods, he had different goals—goals of which Schwantje was unaware. In contrast to Gandhi, Ram Chandra embraced a notion of Hindutva, which was reminiscent of the one developed by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), an advocate of violence as a means of achieving freedom from the British (Kapila 2021: 89–118; Sharma 2011: 147–204). Like Savarkar, he regarded Muslims as foreign elements in India of whom the emerging nation needed to be purged. Ram Chandra believed that this ought to happen in much the same way as the Nazis purged Germany of Jews (Sarmā 2000: 170–87).<sup>18</sup> Schwantje never learnt of Ram Chandra's anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic beliefs. In 1950, when he received a letter from Acharya for the first time since 1937, he asked after Ram Chandra. A close associate of Gandhi told Schwantje that the Mahatma had been unimpressed by him (afas 1950b). This harsh judgement lessened Schwantje's respect for the Mahatma who, in his opinion, cared too little about animals. Gandhi, or so he argued, had been 'a very honourable man, yet sometimes pronounced wrong judgements' (afas 1950c).

## CONCLUSION

As this brief overview shows, India's influence on German vegetarianism was less direct than it was on British vegetarianism. However, as Gustav Struve's early novel *Mandaras Wanderungen* has demonstrated, it was there long before the surge of interest in Asian spirituality, which, according to Suzanne Marchand (2013), was confined to the Weimar period in Germany. Also, as the examples of Wilhelm Hübbe Schleiden, Bernhard Förster, Ludwig Ankenbrand, Werner Zimmermann, and Magnus Schwantje show, several direct contacts were made between German-speaking and Indian protagonists that the previous research has ignored. Encounters with India, therefore, were not confined to the realm of fantasy, though fantasy certainly played a major role.

Emerging at a time of industrialization and urbanization, in Europe organized vegetarianism was cast as a means of regenerating humankind, of regaining the purity that Europe's supposedly increasingly degenerative workers and city dwellers seemed to have lost. This search often took on

<sup>18</sup>In his support of the Nazi government, Ram Chandra was not a singular case among Hindu nationalists. As Maria Framke (2013) and others have shown, Hitler and the Nazis were widely admired and even read in Hindu nationalist circles.

clear racial connotations. India therefore came to be of interest not only as a supposed homeland of vegetarianism, but also as a country in which ‘Aryans’ had supposedly originated or settled. Thus, India was considered synonymous with both Hinduism and Brahminism. Few vegetarians noticed that other communities and religions on the subcontinent did not embrace vegetarianism, or if they did, they tended to approve of the discrimination and hierarchies to which non-vegetarians were exposed. Enthusiasm for India among German-speaking vegetarians was often ambivalent, for those attracted to the idea of Aryanism were quick to find ways of claiming their own superiority, even if they considered themselves in need of purification.

How close were vegetarians who embraced Aryanism to Nazi thought? To be sure, there were significant overlaps. However, it needs to be noted that there were also divergences. First, the Nazi authorities did not share many vegetarians’ convictions that one’s racial status could be upgraded through vegetarian nutrition; a person’s racial identity was considered permanent (Weber 1935). Second, as Corinna Treitel has shown, the Nazi government did not actively promote vegetarianism but merely a diet less rich in meat (Treitel 2017: 189–233). On the other hand, the Nazis clearly accepted vegetarianism. Many of its protagonists, therefore, were able to continue their work. Only pacifist vegetarians like Magnus Schwantje were persecuted under Nazi rule. It is no surprise that certain tendencies in the vegetarian movement, including the notion of Aryanism, survived the Second World War and continued into the 1950s—but that would be subject enough for another chapter.

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