

“Vegetarianism was part of social reformism”

by **Julia Malitska**

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*,² 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.

JM: Why is it important to study the interplay of science, medicine, politics, and culture in German history? Why did you choose and continue with this field? What sparked your long-term interest in it?

CT: It is a rather 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



Corinna Treitel, Professor of History, studies the interplay of modern science, medicine, culture, and politics.

PHOTO: PRIVATE

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 I think it's so 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*.³ That is my philosophy about this particular topic.



Evoking Giuseppe Arcimboldo's 16th-century portraits made of fruits, vegetables, and flowers, the cover of this weekly magazine implies that organic plant foods build firm and healthy flesh. "Bio-Foods: Pleasure without Poison. The Green Bluff?" *Der Spiegel* (July 26, 1982), front cover. DER SPIEGEL 30/ 1982. Published in Corinna Treitel's book *Eating Nature in Modern Germany*, 279.

JM: 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 one of 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 extremely well known, a kind of a popular philosopher, and interested in dreams. He tried to think about dreams from a robust philosophical and scientific standing. He actually shows up in the footnotes of Freud's "The Interpretation of Dreams."⁵ Freud always gets all the credit for bringing dreams into the scope of scientific research, but Carl du Prel was already doing this in the 19th century, and he was also a spiritualist. But no one had ever written about him. So, I wrote a bit about him in my first book, and I have always thought he deserves a full intellectual biography. You have probably found people like this in your own work who are just as interesting. You can only do a little bit with them and then you must leave room for someone else to do more. And then, when it comes to the second book, I am still fascinated by Eduard Baltzer.⁶ He is the theorist of life reform at its very beginning in the 1870s. I find his origins in this kind of dissenting Protestant sectarianism so interesting, and he was involved in things way beyond vegetarianism. For example, he was involved in the kindergarten movement and women's rights, and in the anti-smoking campaign. I am sure that there is a much bigger story there.



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, Heartfield is saying: he talks about peace, but he is violating 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 remilitarization 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.

JM: Were there any established historiographical or popular myths that you faced, challenged, and/or debunked in your research?

CT: Oh yes. You know, the black hole in German history is always the Nazis. When it comes to my first book, there was a historiographic consensus about the occult movement as a sign of German irrationalism and proto fascism. That was the historiographic consensus that I was arguing against. In the second book on natural eating, the challenge was that most German historians consider life reform movements as kind of strange and fringe. For these historians, life reform is interesting, weird and surprising, but not an incubator of innovation whose impact went 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 aftereffects 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 vegetarianism. 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 on 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 knew a lot of 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 saw Germans as 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 supply were also a sort of 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 Germany giving lectures on why everyone should embrace the natural lifestyle and become a vegetarian. There would be someone 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

"I was trying to shake up the way how historians, German historians, think about biopolitics."



A well-fed man happily carves up a potato as if it is a ham. This was typical of the visual propaganda produced by the Nazi regime to convince Germans that plant foods were a healthful and rational substitute for meat. *Vom ausgelassenen Apfelschmalz, vom großen Hans, dem blauen Heinrich und anderen guten Sachen zu Frühstück, Brotaufstrich und Abendessen* (Berlin: Rezeptdienst, Reichsausschuss für volkswirtschaftliche Aufklärung, 1940), front cover. Foto (c) Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen/Ute Franz-Scarciglia. Published in Corinna Treitel's book *Eating Nature in Modern Germany*, 192.

pop up, it is almost always city people playing farmers. There is a definitely an urban dimension, at least in the German context.

JM: Vegetarians in Germany, I guess, were anything but homogeneous. Were there any tensions or power struggles between different ideological currents; were there any attempts to take over, 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 Russian 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 1910s and 1920s, they were interested in what vegetarianism could offer in maintaining a pure Germanic people. But I did not 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 I just I did not see it.

JM: 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, Odesa or St. Petersburg are excellent examples of that. Did ethnic/confessional/religious or gender aspects play a decisive role in the processes you study in the German context?

CT: 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 in with all of those. I did not notice a lot of Catholic vegetarians. But then, on the other hand, it is always difficult to know the confessional background of particular people. I wondered if this mostly was a Protestant phenomenon. Did it maybe have to do with the secularization of Protestant beliefs about the body? That is just speculation.

The other thing I noticed, and maybe someone will develop this later on, is that there seem to be a lot of German Jewish physicians active in coopting the vegetarianism of the life reformers into academic medicine. Germany is a pork-based culture: meat eating for some Jews can be very problematic and this was a moment of assimilation for many Jewish Germans. I always wondered if some of these physicians had found their way into vegetarian circles or maybe even just vegetarian restaurants because it was a way to fit in, a way of being able to sit down for a meal with other people and not have to confront the issue of kosher meat. Again, that is just speculation. But I always thought that it might be an interesting thing for someone to investigate.

JM: I also found a sizeable proportion of Jews engaged in vegetarian activism in the context of the Russian empire, but since I do not have sources of personal origin, I cannot really make any speculations about their motives for joining the movement. Some of the main activists were educated in Austria and Switzerland, and they probably got interested in the ideas of life reform there. Can you think of any lasting results of the activities of German reformers and vegetarians on our post-modern societies, maybe on the ways we think, eat or simply are? In other words, what are the tangible historical legacies of German reformers of the 19th and first half of the 20th century?

CT: German life-reformers elaborated a lot of the arguments that I hear today about why people should eat less meat and buy more organic food. In the United States, a woman by the name of Frances Moore Lappé wrote a very famous book in the 1970s called *Diet for a Small Planet*⁸ and she started her own food activist organization. The book is both a cookbook and a political document, and her basic argument is that meat eating is an inefficient way to use the caloric resources of the world, that it breeds injustice and causes environmental problems.

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 may be the hidden but lasting outcome. Again, for organic farming, I do not know what the case is in Sweden, 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 are still with us today.

JM: Yes, in my source material starting from 1870s, I came across ideas of scientists, climatologists, and geographers about soya and 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 dimensions of this topic, because all of us 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 CBEEES, Södertörn University.

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

references

- 1 Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
- 2 Corinna Treitel, *Eating Nature in Modern Germany: Food, Agriculture, and Environment, c. 1870 to 2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 3 The Petri dish is a laboratory equipment item, and the name entered 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, Freiherr von Prel, 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* (1899) 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 (1814–1887) 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 clergymen, 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 organize themselves using a congregational model.
- 7 Balthasar Friedrich Wilhelm Zimmermann (1807–1878) was a German poet, historian, literary critic and politician.
- 8 *Diet for a Small Planet* is a 1971 bestselling book by Frances Moore Lappé.

“German life-reformers elaborated a lot of the arguments that I hear today about why people should eat less meat and buy more organic food.”