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### **Politicized Timber: The 'German Forest' and the Nature of the Nation**

“Even if we were not in need of wood any more, we still would need the forest. The German people needs the forest like the human race needs wine.” This much-cited statement by German novelist and anthropologist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823-1897) points to the methodological backbone of my paper, combining approaches of intellectual and environmental history: all landscapes are symbolic as much as material phenomena. Referring to Benedict Anderson’s work on ‘imagined communities’ and Simon Schama’s theory of ‘nature as imagination’, they may furthermore be conceptualized as imagined landscapes.

Considering modern German history, the prototypical imagined landscape is the ‘German forest’. From the 19th century onward, intellectuals established it as a main symbol of Germanness, envisioning a special relationship between the people and the forest since prehistoric times. They perceived its alleged principles of stability, hierarchy, and inequality as an antidote against the values of the French Revolution. Following WW I, the ‘forest as educator’ turned into a seemingly natural paradigm for polity and society. Forest imaginations were linked to political myth-conceptions like national identity and racial purity, contrasting the German ‘forest people’ with a stereotypical Jewish ‘desert people’.

When National Socialism came to power in 1933, the ‘German forest’ could function as the token for a broad set of anti-modernist, biologist, nationalist, and racist patterns of thought: the opposite to progress and metropolis, the role model for social order, the ideal of native nature, and the rootage of race. My paper will delineate the intellectual processes in which the natural phenomenon of the forest became a projection screen for these political doctrines.