

# Language, Ideology, and Myth: Racialism and Nationalism in the Development of Indo- European Studies

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### Indo-European Studies: An Overview

Indo-European studies encompasses a broad field of scholarship on the history, culture, society, and languages of the Indo-European peoples, now thought to have originated in pastoral communities on the Pontic-Caspian steppe in the early Bronze Age. These pastoralists, who used wheeled vehicles and had domesticated sheep, cattle, and horses, spread their language and culture into Europe, Anatolia, central and southern Asia, and what is now northwestern China. The Indo-European (IE) peoples are generally defined by a set of related languages, including the Italic, Celtic, Germanic, Balto-Slavic, Hellenic, Armenian, Indo-Iranian, and Albanian groups, the extinct Phrygian, Anatolian, and Tocharian branches, as well as various languages spoken in the ancient Balkans.

While commonalities of vocabulary and structure among distinct languages were noted in Europe as early as the Middle Ages, the exact nature and scope of these relationships were unclear to Western scholars until the late eighteenth century. Then, European scholars, such as William Jones began to notice commonalities between Sanskrit, the ancient language of Hindu and Buddhist scripture and liturgy, and the classical languages of European antiquity. From these observations and the nascent science of comparative philology pioneered by the likes of Jakob Grimm, a hypothesis arose that the languages of northern India,

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greater Iran, and most of Europe shared a common unattested ancestral language: Proto-Indo-European (PIE). Further study of ancient texts through the comparative method has produced a series of reconstructions of PIE, which historical linguists have been revising and expanding to this day.

Very little of that written above has been the consensus long, nor did IE studies or comparative linguistics develop spontaneously in a historical vacuum. I intend to argue here that racism in one form or another was present for the bulk of the field's history and that it took a world war for scholars of IE studies at large to work consciously to expel it from the field. J.P. Mallory begins the epilogue to *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* by addressing the history of racism in the field, even in the works of antifascist authors like V. Gordon Childe.<sup>1</sup> Though racism and nationalism are inextricable from the greater part of the history of Indo-European studies, many authors since 1945 have worked to enrich the field by prioritizing linguistic and archaeological rigor over nationalistic agendas.

### **Philology and Empire: Constructing the Orient through Linguistics**

To characterize racism in the development of IE studies as the result of a singular movement of ideologues perverting an originally apolitical discipline would be historically dishonest. The geopolitical conditions which led eighteenth-century European intellectuals to study the Vedas and hypothesize a kinship between Europe's antiquity and that of India were built on foundations of imperialism and colonial exploitation.

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology, and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989) 266.

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Anglo-Welsh philologist Sir William Jones was introduced to Sanskrit while serving as a puisne judge to the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William, Calcutta during the British Presidency of Bengal.<sup>2</sup> Jones noticed commonalities between Sanskrit, the ancient language of Hindu and Buddhist liturgy, and the Latin, Greek, and Persian he had studied in his youth. His 1786 lecture *Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus* contains the following pronouncement, which will be familiar to most who have studied Sanskrit or comparative linguistics:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists ...<sup>3</sup>

It was this postulation of a hypothetical proto-language that essentially launched the comparative study of Indo-European languages, but its significance is not solely linguistic.

In 1784, Jones founded the Asiatick Society of Bengal, an institute for British scholars to study the East — a pivotal moment for the development not only of linguistics but of Orientalism as well. When discussing Orientalism, that intellectual framework in which Western scholars have characterized the Orient as a distinct “other” to a distinct

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<sup>2</sup> Winfred P. Lehmann, *A Reader in Nineteenth-Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), 10.

<sup>3</sup> William Jones, “Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus” (lecture, Asiatick Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 2 February 1786).

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Occident, one is obliged at least to mention Edward Said, the Palestinian-American author and pioneer of postcolonial theory. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Said has a great deal to say on Jones and his contemporaries as foundational figures in modern Orientalism:

To rule and to learn, then to compare Orient with Occident: these were Jones's goals, which, with an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient to "a complete digest" of laws, figures, customs, and works, he is believed to have achieved. His most famous pronouncement [quoted above] indicates the extent to which modern Orientalism, even in its philosophical beginnings, was a comparative discipline having for its principal goal the grounding of the European languages in a distant, and harmless, Oriental source[.]<sup>4</sup>

In Said's view, Jones and other linguists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries devised linguistic frameworks by which to reduce Oriental cultures to objects of study, framing these cultures as lesser remnants of once-great civilizations:

... and [the Hindus'] features have, most probably, remained unaltered since the time of Dionysius; nor can we reasonably doubt, however *degenerate and abased* [emphasis mine] so ever the Hindus may now appear, that in some early age they were splendid in art and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge ....<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in all his enthusiastic discourse on the richness of the Sanskrit language and Hindu mythology is the assumption that the Hindus of the present are a fallen people whose glory is long past. This view casts the people of India as savage others to be civilized by Occidentals. Jones claims ancient kinship between

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 78

<sup>5</sup> Jones, *On the Hindus*, 14.

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the Vedic Aryans and Europe while at the same time othering the Oriental peoples of his day as exotic and primitive.

I say none of this as an indictment of Jones' character, nor do I mean to diminish the significance of his work to historical linguistics. I simply mean to place his work within a wider geopolitical and academic context. Comparative linguistics and Indo-European studies arose as a byproduct and mechanism of British colonialism in South Asia, and as it developed in Europe, it intersected frequently with racist and nationalist schools of thought, culminating in the atrocities of the Third Reich.

### **The Urheimat Problem**

The notion of modern populations claiming an ancient homeland, or *Urheimat*, is fraught and nationalistic movements and governments have continually exploited it to exclusionary effect and as a pretext for violence. Philip Kohl notes that claims to ancestral homelands are nearly always politically motivated, as are claims of kinship by a modern population with an ancient population.<sup>6</sup> He identifies "Maximal Claims Based on Selective Remembrances of History" first among three key aspects of the concept of a homeland:

According to [A.] Sanders [who in 1942 advanced Central Europe as the wellspring of the IE peoples], the *Urheimat* of the Indo-Germanen stretches all the way to the Araxes River in the southern Caucasus. Whatever happened to all the peoples speaking Caucasian (or, for that matter, Turkish) languages in the Caucasus? They have simply disappeared, been

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Kohl, "Homelands in the Present and in the Past: Political Implications of a Dangerous Concept," in *The Archaeology of Power and Politics in Eurasia: Regimes and Revolutions*, Edited by Charles Hartley, G. Bike Yazicioğlu, and Adam Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 147-56

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effaced by the victorious “coming into being” of the Indo-Germanen.<sup>7</sup>

When modern nationalist movements claim ancestral homelands, the presence of other groups who currently occupy or have historically occupied those lands is erased; elements not identified with the *Volk* in question is otherwise written off as alien. This is to say nothing of how difficult it usually is to identify with any degree of certainty a singular ethnolinguistic identity (as understood in the present) to bygone material cultures without written records; one cannot infer the language someone speaks or spoke from analyzing their skull. That archaeologists and linguists have been able to identify early IE migrations with illiterate bygone material cultures is a small miracle, owing largely to the writing down of orally transmitted memories of prehistory centuries or even millennia after the fact.

It is because of this lack of written attestations of PIE, coupled with a history of political interests influencing the scholarship of antiquity, that the question of the Indo-European Urheimat has been the subject of such prolonged debate. Historical models of IE expansion have included origins in Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Levant, South Asia, Central Asia, Central Europe, Northern Europe, the North Pole, the Balkans, and even Atlantis.<sup>8</sup> Though the Anatolian hypothesis has resurfaced multiple times in recent decades, Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis has been widely accepted in the mainstream. This model, which places the Urheimat south of the Ural Mountains and along the Pontic-Caspian steppes and identifies

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<sup>7</sup> Kohl, “Homelands in the present,” 150.

<sup>8</sup> David W. Anthony, *The Horse, The Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 83.

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the late Copper Age Kurgan cultural horizon with the earliest Indo-Europeans, is based in a comparison of cognate IE words for wheels, wagons, and livestock with the material remains of those steppe cultures.<sup>9</sup>

### Nationalism and the Aryan Myth

The association of the term “Aryan” with racialism and nationalism is relatively recent. The Proto-Indo-Iranian autonym *\*árjas*, reconstructed from cognate terms in Sanskrit, Avestan, and Old Persian, was originally used only in Indo-Iranian languages, with loanwords appearing in ancient Greek (*Ἄριοι* “Medes, Iranians, residents of the satrapy of Aria”) and possibly in the Uralic languages as *\*orja* (slave, southerner). There is no evidence to suggest that the Proto-Indo-Europeans ever existed as a unified political entity, nor is there evidence that such an entity referred to itself as Aryan. In David W. Anthony’s interpretation,

The *Rig Veda* was a ritual canon, not a racial manifesto. If you sacrificed in the right way to the right gods, which required performing the great traditional prayers in the traditional language, you were an Aryan; otherwise you were not. The *Rig Veda* made the ritual and linguistic barrier clear, but it did not require or even contemplate racial purity.<sup>10</sup>

This did not stop European writers such as late 19<sup>th</sup> century French anthropologist Georges Vacher de Lapogue or early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe from using the term Aryan to refer to all Indo-European peoples; in the United States the term was adopted to mean simply White. This use remains common in fringe American white supremacist and

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<sup>9</sup> Marija Gimbutas, “The Indo-Europeans: Archaeological Problems.” *American Anthropologist* 65, no. 4 (August 1963) 815-36.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony, “The Horse, the Wheel...,” 11.

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separatist groups, notably the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang and the Aryan Nations terrorist organization.

Vacher de Lapogue, a racist and eugenicist, attempted to classify the Aryan, according to his own understanding of Linnaean taxonomy, as its own species, *Homo europaeus*, distinguishing other recorded ethnic elements of IE society as “savage” and alien.<sup>11</sup> Even Childe, a pioneer of the Marxist school of archaeology, used the term as a catch-all as late as 1926, acknowledging in his book *The Aryans* the ahistorical nature of that usage:

Philologists will at once complain that the term “Aryan” is unscientific. Of course, I know that only the Indians and Iranians actually designated themselves by this name. But what expression is to be used conventionally to denote the linguistic ancestors of the Celts, Teutons, Romans, Hellenes, and Hindus if Aryan is to be restricted to the Indo-Iranians? The word Indo-European is clumsy and cannot even claim to be scientific now that Indian Sanskrit is no longer the most easterly member of the linguistic family known<sup>12</sup>... Aryan on the other hand has the advantage of brevity and familiarity. I therefore propose to retain it, quite conventionally, in the traditional sense.<sup>13</sup>

Childe is remarkable in that he was quick to disavow the notions of Aryan superiority and aesthetic fetishization of language expressed in *The Aryans* when he saw the rise of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s. By the beginning of the Second World War he had abandoned the all-encompassing usage of the term altogether. Even in *The Aryans* he

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<sup>11</sup> Georges Vacher de Lapogue, “Old and New Aspects of the Aryan Question.” *American Journal of Sociology* 5, no. 3, Translated by Carlos C. Closson (November 1, 1899) 329–46.

<sup>12</sup> The Tocharian languages, spoken in northwestern China till the eighth century BCE, had only recently been discovered at the time.

<sup>13</sup> V. Gordon Childe, *The Aryans: a Study of European Origins* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1926), xi.



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demonstrates due skepticism toward the more transparently nationalistic Central European hypothesis on the IE Urheimat, and he concludes that a steppe homeland was the most likely candidate, prefiguring Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of various nationalisms in Europe, especially in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. Notably, German-speaking thinkers sought to cultivate a German national identity from which to build a nation-state. Due to the lack of an attested Germanic literary tradition in classical antiquity, German Romantics such as Schlegel attempted to draw spiritual connections between the German people specifically and the ancient Aryan (i.e. Indo-Iranian) civilizations.<sup>14</sup> This formed the philosophical basis for the identification of Germanness with *das arische*.

This conception of the German people as the true heirs to an ancient Aryan heritage, bolstered by racist pseudoscience, became central to Nazi idealizations of the past. The ideology of *Lebensraum*, "living-space," had been used to justify Imperial German expansion during World War I, but it reached its peak during WWII as the rationale behind *Generalplan Ost*, which would have involved the ethnic cleansing of Slavs, Ashkenazi Jews<sup>15</sup>, and Roma from those Central and Eastern European territories conquered by the Nazis through Operation Barbarossa. All in that region spoke Indo-European languages; indeed, of all these, Germans included, only the Romani have historically spoken Indo-Aryan

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<sup>14</sup> Alexei Vladimirovich Pimenov, *German Romantic Nationalism and Indian Cultural Tradition* (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2015), 140.

<sup>15</sup> Yiddish descends from Middle High German.

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languages.<sup>16</sup> The Nazi conception of *das arische* was not linguistic, but rather rooted in *Blut und Boden*: blood and soil. By this logic, Slavs, Romani, and Ashkenazi Jews were alien elements occupying *Lebensraum* required by the Reich.

### Scholarship Since 1945

I do not wish to imply that *all* scholarship on Indo-European language and culture prior to and during the Second World War was racist pseudoscience, or that the greater part of IE studies should be cast aside because of the ideological and political forces that affected its development. Childe, as mentioned above, was appalled at how the Nazis were applying the ideas he had discussed in his work, and he became vocally antifascist during the war. Nor do I mean to suggest that ideology has been absent from postwar IE studies. For instance, as Anthony points out, the new-age Goddess movement favored by Gimbutas and others replaced the myth of the noble Aryan with a similarly reductive myth of merciless conquerors who destroyed a prelapsarian matriarchal utopia.<sup>17</sup> Even though Soviet and post-Soviet steppe archaeology has largely borne out the material component of Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis, leading to its acceptance as the consensus view, the archaeology of Russia and former Soviet territories has largely been motivated by one form of Russian nationalism or another, which still affects discourse on steppe prehistory even after eight decades of increased global wariness of European ethnonationalism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 160.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, 10*.

<sup>18</sup> Kohl, "Homelands in the present."

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The purely linguistic aspect of IE studies has developed with remarkable continuity since Jones. Schlegel, Rasmus Rask, Grimm,<sup>19</sup> Karl Verner,<sup>20</sup> and Ferdinand de Saussure's<sup>21</sup> observations of regular phonological changes between IE languages have more or less held to the present day, and the linguistic work of Franz Bopp, August Schleicher, and Karl Brugmann form the foundation of the current understanding of IE grammatical structure.<sup>22</sup> The primary focus in 20<sup>th</sup> century IE linguistics has been on the refinement of laryngeal theory and the finer points of semantics. Contemporary IE linguists like Robert S.P. Beekes and Andrew Byrd owe a greater debt to Grimm and Bopp than to Vacher de Lapogue and Childe.<sup>23</sup>

Models of the spread of the IE languages have undergone several revisions: whereas Schleicher illustrated the diversification of the IE languages as a cladistic tree of the kind used in the taxonomy of species,<sup>24</sup> some more recent authors subscribe to "wave theory," which depicts not a branching tree of distinct languages but a series of migrations in which different dialects, especially those that would become the Germanic languages, interacted with their neighbors within and without

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<sup>19</sup> Henry M Hoenigswald, "On the History of the Comparative Method." *Anthropological Linguistics* 5, no. 1 (1963): 1-11.

<sup>20</sup> R.S.P. Beekes, *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics: An introduction, Second edition* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011): 131.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Morpurgo Davies, "Saussure and Indo-European Linguistics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, edited by Carol Sanders, 9-29 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Hoenigswald 1963

<sup>23</sup> I.e., their work is more concerned with comparative PIE linguistics than with attaching modern notions of political or spiritual significance to prehistoric steppe pastoralist cultures; see Beekes as well as Andrew Byrd, *The Indo-European Syllable* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> August Schleicher, "Introduction to a Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek and Latin Languages," in Lehmann, *A Reader in...*

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the IE family. Even the way in which Indo-European language and culture spread has been revised. Anthony takes a diffusionist approach, akin to Childe, arguing that Indo-European culture spread not simply through a violent conquest by a horde of barbarian riders, as Gimbutas asserted, but rather because adoption of IE customs and language was politically and economically beneficial for chieftains of neighboring tribes.<sup>25</sup> When the purpose of one's research is not to justify border expansion and ethnic cleansing, one need not project modern romantic nationalisms onto ancient cultures and can arrive at a variety of fascinating conclusions.

My personal favorite work of recent IE scholarship, Calvert Watkins' *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (1995), applies principles of comparative Indo-European linguistics to a study of devices, idioms, and themes common in several ancient and medieval IE poetic traditions.<sup>26</sup> Through comparison of a number of linguistic and poetic motifs, Watkins seeks to illuminate elements of early IE religion, cultural values, social structure, and even the roots of poetic meters and prosody. On the subject of sacrificial and burial practices, he draws frequent connections between customs described in the Vedic and Homeric epics and the findings of archaeologists from Bactria to the Balkans, creating a vivid portrait of how the ancient Indo-Europeans viewed themselves, their lives, their gods, and their dead. It is an illuminating, enriching, inspired synthesis of disciplines that in my view represents the best one could hope for from Indo-European studies. While it would be irresponsible to ignore the importance of Indo-European studies

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<sup>25</sup> Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, 118*

<sup>26</sup> Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) vii.

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to racist and nationalist ideologies, the field has seen some of its most creative and revelatory scholarship in the decades since the Second World War thanks in large part to postwar scholars' dedication to rigor in the disciplines of archaeology and linguistics.

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