

## KULTURNATION

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*In this essay, Calvin Clay Snyder probes the intellectual origins of the German national unification movement during the nineteenth century. Mr. Snyder is a graduating history major at Eastern.*

The traditional historical analysis of the roots of 19th century German nationalism and eventual unification later in the century tends to emphasize the War of Liberation of 1813-1814 as the crucible in which German nationalism was forged. Although this war against Napoleon's aggression in the name of French Enlightenment liberated Europe from French domination, it must not be denied that many elements were already in place in the German psyche which prepared the Germans for a separate identity. German thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Fichte, Friedrich Jahn, and Ernst Moritz Arndt, had already provided the intellectual impetus for a cultural nationalism that downplayed enlightened individualism and emphasized community struggle towards a German identity. The defeat of Prussia at Jena and Auerstedt on

October 14, 1806, by the Napoleonic forces had awakened in German minds the fear that with the destruction of Prussia their somewhat tenuous identity might be completely obliterated. Influential German intellectuals came to the forefront to rescue German identity through a glorification of the German peoples' language and history. No less a figure than Johann Wolfgang Goethe dismissed their work as the affair of a few thousand educated men while millions remained soundly asleep. Yet, these thinkers were decisive in shaping the German romantic longing for a true harmonious folk-community in which individuals, contrary to the enlightenment's stress in individualist ideals, would reach freedom only by identifying with the greater whole. Thus, as a reaction to radical French nationalism Germans adopted Johann Gottfried Herder's idea of the *Volksstamm* based on language.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hagen Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck, 1763-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 50.

Herder's ideas had been published already in the late 18th century. In his *Another Philosophy of History* (1774) and *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1784-91) he described history as progressing through struggle, not by reason as the Enlightenment thinkers had suggested. He believed that different nations based on distinct languages had existed before the State and each was held together by a national spirit (*Volksgeist*) which was best expressed in folklore and folktales. He believed the nation was a community based on blood, and the nation-state would be a natural grouping of similar blood. Herder did not write to sway political movements, but after 1806 Germans were living a fragmented existence and his sense of Germanness appealed to the intellectuals during the French occupation. German thinkers exchanged and updated his ideas and influenced the cultural nationalism that was building.

The idealist philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte was also influential in the growth of this cultural nationalism. In the winter of 1807-08, following the Prussian defeat by Napoleon, Fichte gave a series of lectures to an audience of students and academics in Berlin called *Addresses to the German Nation*. These lectures were an attack on Napoleon's occupation of the European continent. Fichte focused his lectures on persuading the Germans that they had a special duty to preserve their culture that had been under foreign influence. Fichte did not totally reject Enlightenment ideas as some other German thinkers were doing. His liberal influences were revealed in his eighth address when he claimed:

It follows that the state, merely as the government of human life in its progress along the ordinary peaceful path, is not something which is primary and which exists for its own sake, but is merely the means to the higher purpose of the eternal, regular, and continuous development of what is purely human in this nation.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, like the liberals and Enlightenment thinkers, Fichte believed the nation-state was the means to a higher human purpose, not an end in itself. Fichte extended Herder's ideas on language and claimed a nation's existence is damaged if it allows its language to be influenced by foreign words or abandons its language for another. He cited examples both of the French who, he argued, had exchanged their original language for a Latin language, and of Prussia, whose defeat at Jena in 1806, he claimed, was a result of Prussia having been Frenchified under Frederick II. Fichte claimed the cultural survival of a people depended first on the formation of a nation. He felt the next step was to form

<sup>2</sup> George Armstrong Kelly, ed., *Addresses to the German Nation, Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 125.

the German nation into a single state. Fichte's ideas were simply ideas and were not based on political realities. Although he offered no concrete policies, his rhetoric inspired his German audience. Under the French occupation, Germans developed an intellectual voice and terms like Fatherland, *Volk*, and Nation became key political words, and set the tone for the educated bourgeoisie's sense of nationalism.

Another influence in the development of nationalistic ideas in Germany were the "Awakeners of Germanness," especially Friedrich Jahn and Ernst Moritz Arndt.<sup>3</sup> Jahn, considered the father of the gymnastics movement, encouraged young Germans to make themselves fit to liberate their country. He also emphasized the need to preserve the racial purity and customs of the German people in his book *Deutsches Volkertum* (German National Character, 1810). More radical than Jahn, Arndt's rhetoric was fiercely anti-French, anti-semitic, and called the German people to action. "The highest religion is to love the fatherland above law and princes, fathers and mothers, wives and children."<sup>4</sup> Arndt expressed his definition of the fatherland:

Where God's sun first appeared to you, where the stars of heaven first twinkled at you, where lightning first revealed to you God's almighty power and where his storm-winds roared through your soul producing Holy terror, there is your love, there is your fatherland.<sup>5</sup>

With this strong nationalistic rhetoric it appeared any liberal or Enlightenment ideas regarding individual liberty, equality, or the universal rights of man were being snuffed out by a strong German Nationalism that emphasized the cultural and racial ideals of the fatherland.

Good evidence that the roots of German nationalism were already growing on the eve of the War of Liberation is the widespread existence of the *Deutsche Burschenschaft* (German student fraternities). These fraternities promoted a union of students in every institution of higher education to promote national unity. Among the student's duties was that of "esteeming above everything the German people and the German fatherland, and he must be German in his words, deeds and life."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, already by 1813 and on the eve of the War of Liberation, a political atmosphere was forming, and key words such as Germanness, Fatherland, *Volk*, and Patriotism were stamped in the intelligentsia's lexicon of a call to action.

3 Michael Hughes, *Nationalism and Society, Germany, 1800-1945* (Baltimore: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 27.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism*, 52.

The War of Liberation lasted a short one-and-one-half years, and Napoleon was defeated. Other than removing the French occupation, what was achieved? Was Germany any closer to national unity? Germany was still only a cultural expression and the German state did not materialize until the Bismarckian white revolution almost seventy years later. But a sense of German identity that was the basis for later nationalism was in place before the War of Liberation. This ideal evolved in the ensuing decades and contributed to the authoritarian evolution that created the state of Germany. Thus, the few thousand men Goethe referred to shaped the agenda of future nationalism, even though it would be a few more years before the millions would awake.