

## Germany's Identity Problems as Reflected in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Hans-Joachim Hahn

Oxford Brookes University

### *Abstract*

*This article assesses the reception of western concepts of nation as portrayed during the French Revolution of 1789, both in the literature of Schubart, Bürger, Klopstock and Wieland and in the philosophy of Herder and Fichte. The development of this concept of nationality during the wars against Napoleon and the policies of the Vormärz, up to the 1848 Revolutions is examined with special reference to the more collective, exclusive and authoritarian tendencies after 1848 and during a period of Realpolitik. Part two of the paper examines how literature and in particular popular histories of literature have reflected on these developments. The paper concludes that major elements of existing western concepts of national identity were not met by the establishment of the German nation state in 1871 and that these concepts were fulfilled only after Germany's 'second unification' in 1990.*

This paper aims to re-examine Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of *Volk* in accordance with his view of the French Revolution and concurrent statements by other writers on nation and patriotism. Since much of Herder's work is not readily available in translation, scholars all too often regurgitate old accounts which tend to portray Herder as a Romantic and even a possible precursor of National Socialism.<sup>1</sup> Even German scholars have for too long seen Herder and his contemporaries as nationalists and the paper will examine the extent to which literary critics, in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, perpetuated this misconception, thereby contributing to the failure in 1871 to establish a democratically inspired national identity in the new nation state. My approach will therefore be interdisciplinary, connecting historical with literary and philosophical aspects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

In the context of this paper, the subject of national identity will be restricted to the western world, where it forms part of a cognitive process with its roots in the European Enlightenment. The Abbé de Sieyès, a disciple of Rousseau, addressing the French National Assembly in 1789, equated the third estate with the nation and demanded that it should be given full recognition.<sup>2</sup> His definition was based on a well-established political structure, as existed in France and other western states; it could not be adopted in central and eastern Europe. While welcoming the emerging concept of a nationality based on universal laws and a clearly defined will of the people, these countries had to forge alternative concepts, often based on such all-inclusive denominators as language and a common tradition. They were, as Helmuth Plessner put it with reference to Germany, ‘late developers’.<sup>3</sup> Plessner’s notion of Germany’s special path has been questioned in recent years, since we can recognize national ‘peculiarities’ in all nations.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, all forms of identity are created ‘through the relation to the other’ and are ‘more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity’.<sup>5</sup> Today, the concept of national ‘identity’ is generally defined by its plurality. Stuart Hall describes these identities as ‘points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us’.<sup>6</sup> It seems that in our globalized world national identities have become ‘hybridized’; they can no longer stipulate uniqueness.<sup>7</sup>

With reference to this paper, however, certain perceived west-European identity claims will be applied, since their ‘normative’ values have shaped the modern democratic nation state. I am therefore taking a critical stance towards some postmodern theories which have adopted a de-centred, merely ‘referential’ perspective, rendering all identity claims relative. Such definitions tend to concentrate on fringe groups: minorities who seek to displace dominant positions within a process of ‘disidentification’.<sup>8</sup> They may have their validity in explaining the emergence of post-colonial nation states, but they should not be applied to eighteenth-century definitions of nationality that favour an element of inclusivity

---

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, ‘What Is the Third Estate?’, quoted in Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *Die verspätete Nation: Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959), pp. 13-19

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 3-14

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs “Identity?”’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

and welcome different ‘ethnies’ within their nation, provided they share their ideas and values.

As far as my own deliberations are concerned, I am greatly indebted to Anthony Smith, whose ‘working definition’ understands national identities as ‘the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identification of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements’.<sup>9</sup> Symbols, myths and common memories, real or imagined, have contributed to that composite organization we call nationality. Their impact has to be superimposed on any cognitive process of nation building since they themselves are the product of national literatures and national historiographies, especially where ‘special traditions’, such as national festivals, ceremonies for national heroes, flags and anthems are concerned.<sup>10</sup> Our investigation into Germany’s identity problems can only be sketched out here in the shape of a rapid journey through German history during the nineteenth century; its main focus is to examine how they became reflected in standard works of German literary criticism during this period.

Abbé de Sieyès’s revolutionary equation of nation with the third estate was certainly known east of the Rhine, though its author may not have been acknowledged. Sieyès himself was much indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose formula of a *volonté générale* departed from well-known concepts of parliamentary democracy.<sup>11</sup> Sieyès believed that the English model had brought about ‘the waning of patriotism, the activity of private interest, the immensity of States, conquests’; it had surrendered the nation’s freedom to members of parliament rather than to its citizens.<sup>12</sup> The new French concept of patriotism was founded on the trinity of freedom, equality and fraternity; it was incompatible with monarchical rule, a two-chamber parliament and existing social divisions. It was based on neither ethnicity nor language and defined foreigners as those who did not wish to be integrated into the nation. It also shared many aspects with the American Declaration of Independence; both are based on a spirit of inclusivity and on cosmopolitan universal rights, and both hoped for the overthrow of the old autocratic and feudal systems in Europe. Although notions of a general

---

<sup>9</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism, Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 14-46.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John Smith, ‘Thesen über den “deutschen Willen”’, in *Die nationale Identität der Deutschen: Philosophische Imaginationen und historische Mentalitäten*, ed. by Wolfgang Bialas (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2002), pp. 231-47.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. by Roger D. Masters, trans. by Judith R. Masters (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1978), p. 102.

emancipation and a one and indivisible nation soon lost much of their impact, its cosmopolitan principles survived.

French and American ideas of emancipation within nationhood had a profound impact on German writers and philosophers. The storming of the Bastille became a symbol of freedom for Ludwig van Beethoven, who dedicated his *Eroica* to this event. Friedrich Schiller, newly appointed professor of history at Jena University, considered moving to the ‘rejuvenated Gaul’<sup>13</sup> and Johann Gottlieb Fichte proclaimed himself ‘an admirer of political freedom and the idea of the nation which promises to spread freedom’.<sup>14</sup> The aged Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock welcomed the Revolution as ‘the century’s most noble deed’ and praised the National Assembly as an historic achievement.<sup>15</sup> While responses by major German writers are recognized, little is known of the attitude of more obscure intellectuals. Only a few figures can be cited here. Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart declared himself a ‘patriot’,<sup>16</sup> thereby anticipating aspects of the French Revolution. He was concerned with social and political reforms and lamented the lack of a patriotic spirit in his own ‘fatherland’. Schubart gained inspiration from the American War of Independence and referred to the many thousands of Germans sold to the British armed forces as a ‘fertile sermon for patriots’ whose hearts throb ‘when their fellow citizens share the fate of negro slaves, as they are sent abroad, sacrificed in an alien land’.<sup>17</sup> The beginning of the French Revolution had an even greater impact on German patriots. In one of his last publications Schubart acknowledges its rejuvenating vigour, no longer perceiving his French neighbours as decadent, vain and cowardly, but as ‘the genius of freedom, greatness and truthfulness’.<sup>18</sup>

Gottfried August Bürger (1747-94) wrote in a similar spirit, imploring his fellow citizens to open their eyes and understand that their fatherland had been taken from them by their German princes.<sup>19</sup> In 1789 Joachim Heinrich Campe, philanthropist and pedagogue, rushed to Paris to witness the end of despotism. Recognizing the cosmopolitan character of the French nation state, he believed that it could also be adopted in Germany. Georg Forster

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Noch ist Deutschland nicht verloren*, ed. by Walter Grab and Uwe Friesel (Munich: Hanser, 1970), p. 19. [Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the author.]

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Otto Dann, *Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland 1770-1990* (Munich: Beck, 1993), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, ‘Kennet Euch selbst’, in *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. by K. A. Schleiden (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> *Deutsche Chronik auf das Jahr 1774*: 46. Stück, ed. by Christian F. D. Schubart (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1975), p. 365.

<sup>17</sup> *Chronik auf das Jahr 1776*: 25. Stück, ed. by Christian F. D. Schubart, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Schubart, *Chronik auf das Jahr 1789*: 55. Stück, quoted in Wilfried F. Schoeller, *Schubart. Leben und Meinungen eines schwäbischen Rebellen* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1979), p. 165. (The reprographic reprint of the *Chronik* ends in 1777.)

<sup>19</sup> Gottfried August Bürger, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Günter Häntzschel and Hiltrud Häntzschel (Munich: Hanser, 1987), p. 462.

(1754-94) became a founder member of the Mainz Jacobin Club, which was open to everyone who wanted to contribute 'to the happiness of the fatherland and to a mankind that sighed under the chains of slavery'.<sup>20</sup> Members of the Club called themselves 'patriots', their journal was *Der Patriot* and their 'fatherland' was not their birthplace or home, but a political entity, where citizens enjoyed full rights of self-determination.<sup>21</sup> Christoph Martin Wieland in his 'Cosmopolitan Address to the French National Assembly' (October 1789) acknowledged the new patriotism and blamed Germany's lack of national spirit on the country's particularistic nature. He hoped that German writers might create 'a genuine patriotism which would be enhanced through the cultivation of a patriotic history'.<sup>22</sup>

In view of Germany's political fragmentation, some specifically cultural prerequisites were added to Sieyès's cosmopolitan ideas. They turned the emphasis more in the direction of Rousseau, reinforcing the importance of history and language for the establishment of national identity and rendering it slightly more exclusive. The new emphasis on ethno-linguistic elements has often been overstated or seen in isolation. Napoleon's occupation of large parts of Germany and the subsequent Wars of Liberation were bound to elicit anti-French, even chauvinistic sentiments, but the democratic spirit of the Revolution survived.

The two most important philosophers to promote a German nationality concept were Herder and Fichte. Historians and literary critics have in the past often blamed both of them for preparing the ground for German nationalism. Even recent studies tend to overstate the difference between their concept of nationhood and that of their French counterparts.<sup>23</sup> A re-examination of Herder's concept of *Volk* and Fichte's perception of *Nation* will illustrate how both philosophers sought to combine revolutionary aspects of patriotism, based on cosmopolitan qualities of an inclusive humanism, together with a cultural ethnicity, derived from linguistic and cultural developments.

Herder shared Immanuel Kant's general interest in the nature of humankind, accepting a cognitive process of emancipation as part of an organic development, but opposed his abstract, universal categories in favour of a more empirical and consequently also more inclusive approach to public life. For Herder, the organic development of humankind emanates from early family structures via a simple community life towards societies with a

---

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Grab and Friesel, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Franz Dumont, 'The Rhineland', in *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution*, ed. by Otto Dann and John Dinwiddy (London: Hambledon, 1988), pp. 160-61.

<sup>22</sup> Christoph Martin Wieland, 'Der allgemeine Mangel deutschen Gemeinsinnes und Nationalgeistes und Mittel zu deren Erweckung und Belebung', in *Deutschland! Deutschland? Texte aus 500 Jahren von Martin Luther bis Günter Grass*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), pp. 159-64.

<sup>23</sup> Bhabha, p. 1; Hagen Schulze, *States, Nations and Nationalism*, trans. by William E. Yuill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 156-58; Anthony D. Smith, p. 21.

highly developed moral sensibility. He dissociated himself even more than Sieyès or Rousseau from the mainstay of a rational analysis of constitutional matters and sought instead a return to earlier forms of organization and a general regeneration based on each community's individual culture, language and customs. Herder's appreciation of the Revolution is set out in the original version of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1783-90), in which he describes the Revolution as 'the greatest event in our history', predicting that it would promote 'justice, wisdom, fairness and harmony'.<sup>24</sup> His poem on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille hails the transformation of 'Franks' into brothers who, as a new 'chosen people', would also renew humankind.<sup>25</sup> He employs the well known theological concept of *palingenesis*<sup>26</sup> in order to illustrate this rejuvenation within the context of the Revolution and suggests that the revolution would return humankind to its natural state, thereby cleansing it from political despotism.<sup>27</sup> Herder's concept of *Volk* should therefore be understood as a corrective to the rationalism of Enlightenment thought. By rejecting the rational view of history as a linear progression along some abstract and universal principles in favour of a comprehensive, individualizing process, Herder sees history as a function of specific conditions of climate, geography and time. Each *Volk* is therefore conditioned by its coexistence and interchange with other cultures. The implicit danger in Herder's formula centres on his understanding of national identity: by relating it to a number of historical, organically developed values, he inevitably weakens the Enlightenment cluster of identity-values in favour of greater uniformity, thereby also reducing each individual's responsibility in preference to the collective *Volk*.

Herder's observations on the Jewish people in ancient Israel will illustrate this. While he acknowledges the origins of the Jews in the emerging tribe of Abraham, he gives a specific priority to their language and religion which become their legal and cultural foundation. Each individual is integrated into a holistic system of language and culture, with education playing a pivotal role.<sup>28</sup> Language becomes a vehicle for self-expression; the reciprocity of thinking and speaking will strengthen the community and emphasize its national identity. This

---

<sup>24</sup> J. G. Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan, 33 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877-1913), xviii, 317. Cf. also Richard Critchfield, 'Revolution and the Creative Arts: Towards a Reappraisal of Herder's Defence of the French Revolution', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Innovator through the Ages*, ed. by Wulf Koepke and Samson B. Knoll (Bonn: Bouvier, 1982), pp. 190-91.

<sup>25</sup> 'Auf den 14. Juli 1790', in Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, xxix, 659-60.

<sup>26</sup> Some historians have employed this concept exclusively within the context of fascism, thereby distorting its broader philosophical meaning. Cf. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), pp. 32-36.

<sup>27</sup> Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, xiii, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, v, 131-34.

perception of *Volk* is neither nationalistic nor Euro-centric; it favours a peaceful coexistence of individual nations as different components of humankind.

Fichte also takes his cue from the Revolution and in particular from Rousseau's concept of *volonté générale*. Three of his early works attempt to apply revolutionary principles to the situation in Germany.<sup>29</sup> He links his central argument to the concept of human rights, insisting that nobody must impinge on an individual's freedom and that the 'realm of selfishness' must be overcome and replaced by a new regime of freedom which will provide universal self-determination. Best known among Fichte's works is his *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, delivered in 1807/8 in the aftermath of Napoleon's victory over Prussia and Austria. The *Reden* not only reflect his disappointment with the new French emperor, but also radiate optimism, anticipating that the German nation might shake off its discredited old governments. Fichte conceives the national identity of a people not primarily in geographical terms or as attached to the political concept of statehood, but as founded on language's spiritual character. He is, however, not interested in the grammatical structure of language, but focuses on etymology, at pains to illustrate how the German language, like ancient Greek, has retained its creativity and sensuality, while other European languages have lost these faculties when adopting foreign words without actually acquiring their true meaning. Fichte's argument therefore reveals a certain tension between his cosmopolitan revolutionary conviction and an implicitly exclusive nationalism which was to reach its climax during the subsequent age of imperialism. While he sought to distinguish carefully between both concepts, as the extract from his *Pädagogische Dialoge* indicates, later generations ignored this balance in favour of blind chauvinism:

Cosmopolitanism is the dominant force for expressing the purpose of human existence within the human race. Patriotism is the force by which this purpose will be achieved first and foremost in that nation of which we ourselves are members, from whence its achievement will spread throughout the human race.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Der Patriotismus und sein Gegenteil', in J. G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. by Reinhard Lauth and others, 35 vols (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1962), II, 9, pp. 387-447; 'Zurückforderung der Freiheit von den Fürsten Europas' in *ibid.*, II, 2, pp. 199-249 and *Beitrag zur Berichtigung des Urteils des Publikums über die Französische Revolution*, ed. by R. Schottky (Hamburg: Suhrkamp, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Nico Wallner, *Fichte als politischer Denker: Werden und Wesen seiner Gedanken über den Staat* (Halle an der Saale: Niemeyer, 1926), p. 193.

The re-emergence of reactionary regimes in 1815 ended all hopes for the establishment of a democratic German nation state and of citizenship as exemplified during the French Revolution. The defeat of Napoleon resulted in two competing movements: while the liberal and democratic spirit of the Wars of Liberation had become indicative of a national revolution, amounting to some kind of *levée en masse*, the recovery of pre-revolutionary forces at the Vienna Congress culminated in the establishment of the Holy Alliance, soon to reveal an illiberal, anti-national and counter-democratic conservatism. It subverted the august revolutionary principles of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* in favour of an autocratic monarchic concept, gaining support from an ecclesiastic system that upheld the union of church and state and supported ‘a bond of true and indissoluble brotherhood while considering [its] own people and armies as subjects in a paternal spirit’.<sup>31</sup>

Progressive, national elements were oppressed, but gained support from the universities, from students and professors. The Wartburg Festival of 1817 centred on the universities; it sought to remind the German people that the defeat of Napoleon had been the work of ordinary citizens, rather than the heroic achievement of a monarch. It also celebrated Martin Luther as a national leader who had stood up against oppression and had devoted his energies to a revival of German language and culture. The *Burschenschaften* (student fraternities) that had emerged during the Wars of Liberation became an important force of opposition; they turned the festival into a protest against the Alliance and displayed a strange mixture of eighteenth-century enlightened attitudes and irrational romantic sentiments. They not only introduced Germany’s national tricolour of black, red and gold, but also published a set of ‘principles and conclusions’ meant to enlighten fellow citizens as to the true nature of the fatherland, ‘to purify and strengthen their minds’ and facilitate an awareness of ‘morality, politics and history’.<sup>32</sup> The Karlsbad Decrees, instituted by the Austrian Chancellor Klemens W. L. von Metternich, sought to control political action across the German Federation; they suspended the *Burschenschaften* and enforced the dismissal and expulsion of ‘subversive’ university teachers and students. Such actions did little to intimidate the republican national spirit, while the French July Revolution of 1830 rekindled political action among young German *literati* who turned against existing monarchic governments, demanding democratic self determination and freedom of expression. The poet and revolutionary Georg Herwegh declared:

---

<sup>31</sup> *The Holy Alliance*, Article 1, quoted in Walter Mönch, *Deutsche Kultur von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Hueber, 1971), p. 258.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hans Joachim Hahn, *The 1848 Revolutions in German-Speaking Europe* (London: Pearson Education, 2001), p. 27.



Our faith is at one with the faith of mankind; fine talks and sweet dreams are over [...] It is the defining mark of modern literature that it is the child of politics, or, in plain German, the child of the French July Revolution.<sup>33</sup>

The Hambach Festival of 1832 became a central event for political activists; it coordinated German efforts into creating a nation state and linked them with similar actions elsewhere. The Festival was attended by over 20,000 supporters, mostly students and journeymen from the southwest. The event itself had been sparked off by the French July Revolution of 1830 and by several disturbances in Brunswick, Saxony and Hesse-Darmstadt as well as by urban unrest in Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna. The choice of Hambach in the Palatinate was significant, since the Palatinate had been part of the French Republic. When it came under the rule of the Bavarian crown in 1815, its citizens lost many of those political rights which they had acquired back in 1789. Johann Georg Wirth, chief organizer of the Festival, and the radical poet Philipp Jakob Siebenpfeiffer recognized a broad pan-European desire for national independence:

We shall help to free Greece from her tyrannical yoke, we toast the re-emergence of Poland and we become angry when the despotism of kings cripples the fervour of the peoples of Spain, Italy and France, we anxiously watch the progress of the Reform Bill in England, we praise the strength and wisdom of the Sultan who is involved in the rebirth of his people, we envy the North Americans their good fortune, which they themselves have bravely brought about.<sup>34</sup>

A veritable rush of sympathy greeted the Polish uprising, not least since the powers of the Holy Alliance had defeated their earlier struggle for national independence. The Polish delegation was enthusiastically welcomed at Hambach, the Polish national flag was hoisted alongside the German tricolour and Festival goers greeted each other with the motto 'Poland is free'.<sup>35</sup> The Polish people, who less than a generation earlier had been described by Forster

---

<sup>33</sup> Georg Herwegh, *Werke in einem Band*, ed. by Hans-Georg Werner, 3rd edn (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1977), p. 318.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *1848: Erinnerungen, Urkunden, Berichte, Briefe*, ed. by Tim Klein (Leipzig: W. Langewiesche-Brandt, 1914), p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Grab and Friesel, pp. 107-36.

as lazy and uncivilized, not fit to form their own nation,<sup>36</sup> were now celebrated as heroic, filled with sincere national fervour.

The 1848 revolutions in Germany proved to be a climax and watershed of German efforts at creating a free and democratic nation. Three broad groups of revolutionaries can be distinguished: a radical, republican wing with its roots reaching back to the revolutionary tradition, an irrational grouping closely associated with the latter phase of the romantic movement, but essentially unfamiliar with the cosmopolitan ambitions of Herder and Fichte and, lastly, a national-liberal faction, which favoured a constitutional monarchy and ultimately succumbed to the reactionary policies of the Prussian government. The revolutions had initially been inspired by the Paris February Revolution. Southern German activists imported its republican, socialist and nationalist programme and employed it in the Rhineland, in Baden and the Palatinate, but also in large industrial centres such as Vienna, Berlin and Frankfurt. Whereas the Vienna revolution was initiated by university students, the Berlin revolution was a more ‘proletarian’ working class movement, exhibiting fierce hatred of the monarchy and the military establishment.

Already during the early stages of the revolutions the more radical wing became marginalized; neither Hecker nor Struwe gained seats in the Paulskirche Parliament, which was installed as Germany’s first democratic assembly, charged with the drafting of a democratic national constitution. National aspirations became diverted when the Schleswig-Holstein conflict focused attention on the war against Denmark. The issue was of central importance to the survival of the Parliament, which was under attack from reactionary Prussia and from external forces such as Britain and France, who sided with Denmark.<sup>37</sup> From then on, the revolution lost its momentum; it sought a compromise solution, based on a constitutional monarchy, with the Prussian monarch as leader of a ‘lesser German’ nation. It is probably not an exaggeration to conclude that the revolutionaries surrendered to the power of the Holy Alliance.

A fundamental change of values was the result, best illustrated by the rise of *Realpolitik*, a term coined by August Ludwig von Rochau. Assessing the political events of the 1830s and 1840s, Rochau concluded that ‘the law of power exercises a similar dominance

---

<sup>36</sup> Forster: *Ein Lesebuch für unsere Zeit*, ed. by Gerhard Steiner and Manfred Häckel (Weimar: Thüringer Volksverlag, 1954), p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Wolfram Siemann, *Die deutsche Revolution von 1848/49* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 153-57.

on matters of state as the law of gravity does over bodies'.<sup>38</sup> *Realpolitik* should therefore be seen as part of the new debate on positivism, which – in political terms – invests all power in the state and surrenders all legislative matters to the state government, often regardless of basic human rights. Within the context of our discussion so far, this means that all forms of a subjective, national identity were rejected in favour of a nationalism entirely based on state power: 'To rule means to exercise power and this can only be done by those in possession of power. The immediate connection between power and domination forms the basic truth of all politics and the key to all history.'<sup>39</sup> *Realpolitik* had an unwholesome influence on German nationalism; it rejected all forms of self-determination, putting the interests of the 'nation' above those of its citizens. The Posen issue is just one example. The Prussian province of Posen had a majority of Polish speakers and during the early phase of the revolution was considered part of a free Polish state. In the latter phase of the revolution, speakers claimed that a 'healthy national egoism' required that it remained part of Germany in accordance with 'the right of the strong, the right of the conqueror'.<sup>40</sup> The establishment of the German nation state under Bismarck was based on this philosophy and will be dealt with later.

Having so far mapped out important aspects in the history of Germany's search for national identity, we shall now examine to what extent the literary historiography reflected this. Within these parameters our observations will be limited to the specific authors discussed so far, while acknowledging that a younger generation of political writers such as Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne, Georg Büchner and others will have to be ignored. None of them actually witnessed the French Revolution of 1789, though their work falls into the category of progressive involvement in the democratic politics of their own age.

The nineteenth century witnessed a fundamental change in the understanding of literature and its attitudes to contemporary life. While the eighteenth century still viewed literature as being central to the comprehension of human knowledge, the early nineteenth century developed two separate schools: on the one hand the growth of a national literature, influenced by Herder's philosophy and the Romantics,<sup>41</sup> and, on the other hand, a literature that was influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's aesthetics and Schiller's idealism.

---

<sup>38</sup> August Ludwig von Rochau, *Grundsätze der Realpolitik, angewandt auf die Zustände Deutschlands*, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Göpel, 1859), I, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der deutschen constituierenden Nationalversammlung zu Frankfurt am Main*, ed. by Franz Wigard, 9 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Sauerländer, 1848), II, 1143-46.

<sup>41</sup> The German term for this school of literature is *Nationalliteratur*; for further study cf. Walter Jens, *Nationalliteratur und Weltliteratur – von Goethe aus gesehen* (Munich: Kindler, 1988) or H. J. Hahn, *German Thought and Culture: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 82-107.

Herder saw poetry as a key to the understanding and formation of a national character and Friedrich Schlegel developed Herder's ideas further, describing history and literature as an inseparable union that was to shape a country's national identity. Such an interpretation gave the collective, national forces priority over individual self determination, thus moving further away from the principles of the 1789 revolution. Literature became an important tool in a nation's search for identity, reviving earlier claims for a national theatre and for the formation of a German *Kulturnation*.<sup>42</sup> Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* focused entirely on cosmopolitan issues and Schiller's philosophy of the aesthetic education of humankind transformed the political concepts of the French Revolution by 'elevating' them into the realm of beauty, thereby cleansing them of human passion.<sup>43</sup> While Schiller's revolutionary message, expressed in his *Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, maintained that we have the right 'to seize with violence our human rights which have been taken from us forcefully and unfairly',<sup>44</sup> his famous play *Don Carlos* distilled this concept into freedom of thought<sup>45</sup> while his last completed play, *Wilhelm Tell*, sublimated the revolutionary element into an idyll with its hero seen as the non-political man who abhors violence.<sup>46</sup>

The social and political function of the history of literature after the 1848 revolutions developed both schools of literature further. It is important to recognize that the national school, influenced by demands of *Realpolitik*, developed increasingly more chauvinistic forms of representation, while 'aesthetic' interpretations were reduced to a 'moralistic' tone, moving towards a new 'Borussian' form of nationalism. Representatives of a national literature often anticipated aspects of the political developments after 1848. The emancipation from a hitherto dominant Latinate Catholicism was now viewed as a major achievement of German national literature: Luther, Hans Sachs and representatives of Weimar classicism were seen as national liberators and the *Sturm und Drang* generation was one-sidedly interpreted as having strengthened national elements against a 'Latinate' French cultural hegemony. As a result, Protestant and 'Prussian' features gained in importance.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Hahn, *German Thought and Culture*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Friedrich Schiller, 'Öffentliche Ankündigung', *Die Horen*, in *Schillers Werke* (Nationalausgabe), ed. by Herbert Meyer, 22 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1958), xxii, 106.

<sup>44</sup> *Schillers Werke*, xx, 319.

<sup>45</sup> Whereas Schiller considered freedom of thought as a means towards a more liberal, humane society, the popular interpretation usually failed to make this connection. *Gedankenfreiheit* became the most frequently quoted Schiller passage. Cf. Georg Büchmann, *Geflügelte Worte: Der Zitatenschatz des deutschen Volkes*, 25th edn (Berlin: Haude & Spensersche Buchhandlung, 1912), p. 174.

<sup>46</sup> H. J. Hahn, 'Schiller's *Tell* – eine revolutionäre Idylle oder eine idyllische Revolution?', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 75 (2006), 37-43 (p. 37).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Robert E. Prutz, 'Deutschlands Einheit und die deutsche Literatur', in Robert E. Prutz, *Neue Schriften zur deutschen Literatur- und Kunstgeschichte*, 2 vols (Halle an der Saale: Niemeyer, 1854), II, 1-61, Hermann Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte der Goethezeit*, ed. by Johannes Anderegg (Munich: Beck, 1970), and Joseph

However, there were also voices of opposition to such an interpretation and the literary history of Georg Gottfried Gervinus presented nationalism in the tradition of Herder and Rousseau. Gervinus was one of the first literary historians to concentrate on German literature as a nation-building force. German literature, he believed, compensated Germans for the lack of political emancipation. The mapping out of a national German literature was to facilitate the development of the German nation. Rather than focusing on individual authors or specific social groups Gervinus concentrated on the *Volk* as the main agent of Germany's national identity; it was to become the actual revolutionary force against the aristocracy. He recognizes in all European states 'a regular progress [...] from the intellectual and civil freedom of one alone, to that of the few and of the many',<sup>48</sup> a progress 'always labouring towards the greater equality of man, and of his relations to life' with the result that 'since the French Revolution monarchy has lost the power of its spell'.<sup>49</sup> In similar manner to Sieyès, Gervinus recognizes the development of 'a national direction' which has made education 'accessible to all classes' so that 'patriotism was roused, with the desire for freedom and equality of rights; and if democracy was not established in all its forms, it was, at least, in all essentials'.<sup>50</sup> The political aim of modern Germany was 'to dissolve the great [German] monarchies into Federal states, which would combine the advantages of both great and small states, and offer a secure pledge for universal freedom and for the peaceful dissemination of every kind of knowledge'.<sup>51</sup> Gervinus saw the current state of Germany as that of a *Kulturnation*; anticipating that its aesthetic emancipation would transform a merely cultural into a political identity. Lessing is credited with having liberated German culture from French domination, but also from the German aristocracy and an all too scholarly emphasis on theoretical knowledge. He welcomes Lessing's endeavour to create a national theatre as a precondition for the creation of a German national identity.<sup>52</sup> Unlike his contemporaries, who celebrated Frederick the Great as Germany's national leader, Gervinus rejected this 'lesser Germany' tradition and returned to Herder's and ultimately Rousseau's concept of *volonté générale*. Discarding the concept of constitutional monarchy in favour of republicanism, he held up the

---

Hillebrand, *Die deutsche Nationalliteratur seit dem Anfang des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1845/6). For a general overview, cf. Jürgen Fohrmann, *Das Projekt der deutschen Literaturgeschichte. Entstehung und Scheitern einer nationalen Poesiegeschichtsschreibung zwischen Humanismus und Deutschem Kaiserreich* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989), pp. 149-70.

<sup>48</sup> Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Introduction to the History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Moritz Sernau (London: Bohn, 1853), p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

<sup>50</sup> Gervinus, *Introduction*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>52</sup> Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen*, 3 vols (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1846), I, 9.

American Declaration of Independence as a model for a future German nation state: ‘by introducing the general franchise for all citizens as equal participants within the state, the great democratic principle was pronounced: the rule of the will of the people was expressed in the form of a law.’<sup>53</sup> This makes it apparent that Gervinus saw the nation not as an aim in itself and he certainly did not wish to promote some kind of national will that would be superimposed above the will of the individual. He compares the democratic development in Germany to that of other ‘divided nations’ such as ‘Judea, Greece, and modern Italy’ and emphasizes its cosmopolitan nature so that it will ‘be satisfied with the moral benefits we had bestowed on the human race’.<sup>54</sup> Such views brought Gervinus into conflict with the authorities of his time; he was tried for high treason and lost his *venia legendi* at Heidelberg University.<sup>55</sup>

The second school of historians of German literature appears at a first glance less ‘nationalistic’, since they emphasize the moral aspects of Germany’s literary development. Rudolph Gottschall concentrates on ‘the development of individual writers’ rather than on common national trends.<sup>56</sup> Weimar classicism in particular, with its establishment of ‘eternal values’, is embraced within the treasures of German poetry. Concealed behind such trends is a new conservatism which serves to promote Prussia and its Protestant tradition. Wilhelm Scherer, possibly the most famous literary historian of his time, celebrated Frederick the Great as having presided over ‘a period of unparalleled literary and aesthetic progress’. According to Scherer, ‘the rise of modern German literature is connected with the Seven Years War, just as the rise of Middle-High-German chivalrous poetry was connected with the first Italian campaigns of Frederick Barbarossa’.<sup>57</sup> The connection between Frederick the Great and Barbarossa was typical of a reactionary monarchic policy that sought to direct German national history towards the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasty, thus preparing the path for Bismarck’s German Unification in 1871. This falsification of national history was accompanied by strong anti-revolutionary, anti-republican sentiments. While the ‘literary revolution’ of the *Sturm und Drang* ‘demanded emancipation from rules, and was, in its political aspect, a movement of opposition to established authorities’, it apparently failed: ‘The poets were obliged to submit themselves again to the sway of rules and their political

---

<sup>53</sup> Gervinus, *Introduction*, p. 94. Cf. also Hahn, *The 1848 Revolutions*, pp. 196-97.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Gervinus’s presentation of his case in his dedication to the brothers Grimm and to Dahlmann in *Geschichte der Deutschen Dichtung*, 5th edn, 5 vols (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1853), I, p. vii.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Fohrmann, p. 173.

<sup>57</sup> Wilhelm Scherer, *A History of German Literature from the Accession of Frederick the Great to the Death of Goethe*, trans. by F. C. Conybeare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), p. 1.

declamations had not the slightest direct effect'.<sup>58</sup> Schubart is therefore praised by Scherer as 'an ardent worshipper of Frederick the Great', and 'his best work is to be found in his popular songs'. He singles out the *Fürstengruft* as 'an attack on tyrants, reproaching them with their crimes against humanity' but relates this attack exclusively to the Duke of Württemberg.<sup>59</sup> Scherer is more critical of Bürger, since 'his imagination failed him in the world of tender feeling, and he tried to replace the want of poetic motives by high sounding words and empty jingle. [...] He ruined his life by profligacy and the severe form in which he sometimes clothes passionate feeling [...] could not take the place of inward nobility of feeling'.<sup>60</sup>

With the rise of a German *Bildungsbürgertum* German literature gained a hitherto unprecedented popularity and several literary historians sought to satisfy the new demand for a more accessible history of German literature. We shall have to restrict ourselves to just two examples. Robert Koenig's *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte* in its extravagantly sumptuous binding is dedicated to the German home. It has no great scholarly ambitions, but wishes 'to steep our generation' in the world of its forefathers. Koenig sees his history as a 'book of inheritance' that 'takes its place in the bookcase of the German home next to the Bible and the family chronicle'.<sup>61</sup> He emphasizes the moral, edifying values of literature, and condenses his understanding of patriotism into an unprecedented admiration for Prussia and the new nation state.

Klopstock's veneration for the French Revolution is seen as an error of judgement which the 'bard' sincerely repented in later years. Wieland is singled out for his 'Francophile fashion'.<sup>62</sup> The *Sturm und Drang* generation is defined as 'the loutish years of German poetry' that spelled ruination for many a man of genius.<sup>63</sup> The passage on Schubart deplores his drifting into 'the tangled and raw life' and his 'vulgar outbursts' are loosely associated with his editorship of a 'politically subversive journal'. Schubart's *Preußenlied*, described as an ode to Frederick the Great, gets singled out for praise, while the remainder of his work is 'deservedly forgotten'.<sup>64</sup> Bürger fares little better. Koenig also refers to his 'tangled, dissolute life-style' and his 'undignified and immoral conduct' that prevented him from turning into a genuine 'Volksdichter'.<sup>65</sup> Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* by contrast is celebrated 'for not advocating

---

<sup>58</sup> Scherer, p. 114.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Koenig, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte*, 12th edn (Bielefeld: Velhagen und Klasing, 1882), dedication [n.p.].

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 432.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

the overthrow of the present order, but for preserving an original state'. He interprets the play as 'a national deed' that represents 'German freedom against French violation and oppression' and as Germany's national liberation from Austria.<sup>66</sup>

Koenig compares the Young Germany movement with the *Sturm und Drang* in its efforts to undermine the moral principles of human society. He dismisses their admiration for the French July Revolution, which sought to raise French values over German morality and replaced German idealism with French sensualism. Anti-semitic sentiments gain the upper hand and Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne are classed as representatives of Saint Simonism who delighted in rejecting all Christian and Germanic values and who 'denigrate our nation again and again in favour of the higher glory of France'.<sup>67</sup> The political authors of the 1848 revolutions are severely criticized; Herwegh in particular is taken to task for his 'tactless, childish and rebellious letter to the noble monarch [Frederick William IV of Prussia], in which he protested against the banning of his journal *Europa*'.<sup>68</sup>

Georg Büchmann's *Geflügelte Worte*, first published in 1864, does not seem to fit into the category of bourgeois nationalist propaganda, since this compendium of quotations includes entries from the Bible as well as from the literatures of many European and some Oriental nations. However, its 25th edition of 1912 is dedicated to 'His Majesty the German Kaiser and King of Prussia Wilhelm II' and its subtitle reads: 'The German People's Treasured Quotations'. Later editions refine this title further, defining a 'geflügeltes Wort' as 'a saying, expression or name that is used in the wider circle of the fatherland, regardless of its language and whose author or literary origin can be traced'.<sup>69</sup> The book's preface highlights two major themes which guided its editors over the years: 'the world-wide German spirit of industriousness' and German dedication to 'progress' which is conceived as an essential ingredient for every life.<sup>70</sup> A preliminary analysis of its contents indicates that quotations by German authors command the lion's share, as is to be expected in a book for German readers. German authors occupy 172 pages, with an additional 75 pages from 'Luther's Bible'. French and English quotations cover 24 and 19 pages respectively, while other modern languages take up between one to four pages. Greek and Roman authors are the exception, taking up 31 and 69 pages and reflecting the importance which a classical education had for the German bourgeoisie. Among the German quotations the neoclassical

---

<sup>66</sup> Koenig, p. 500.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 638.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.

<sup>69</sup> Büchmann, p. xviii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.



period, dominated by Goethe and Schiller, holds a commanding position. We recognize a clear preference for moralizing statements, but also a strong emphasis on ‘fatherland’ and on German virtues. Quotations from history reflect a similar picture, with German history dominated by statements from Bismarck, Luther and Frederick the Great, thereby again emphasizing the ‘Borussian’ spirit of the new Germany.

The various examples from key reference works on German literature give a representative overview of the direction in which German ‘mandarins’ were moving. They reveal a tendency observed already in the political changes during the later stages of the 1848 revolutions and their immediate aftermath. The republican, democratic nationality concept as reflected in Herder, Fichte and among *Vormärz* writers gave way to a new nationality which identified Germany with Prussia and its reactionary monarchic order. It effectively reversed the famous statement by Wilhelm IV of Prussia, made in March 1848, that Prussia would be subsumed into a united Germany and instead sought to absorb Germany within the Prussian monarchy. Our concluding remarks on the founding of the German nation state in 1871 will further illustrate this trend.

These observations on attempts to establish a German national identity during the nineteenth century – though by no means exhaustive – have illustrated a general move away from the Enlightenment concept of a democratic, inclusive identity, based on the free choice of commitment to this identity, towards a collective nationality concept that was entirely founded on a narrow set of norms which subsumed each member of the nation under the dictate of language, culture and a narrow ‘Lutheran’ morality, closely associated with the House of Hohenzollern. While comparable trends can be observed in other European nations who also employed their own kind of *Realpolitik* in order to pursue their imperialist aims, the situation in Germany was perhaps more problematic, since the establishment of a nation state fell into a period which sacrificed the plurality of a hybrid national identity in favour of an authoritarian nation state with scant respect for its many diverse minorities. The proclamation of the *Reich* at Versailles illustrated this. The ceremony was attended only by princes and military leaders, with no civilians or civic representatives present, as the famous painting by Anton von Werner illustrates.<sup>71</sup> Ordinary Germans played no part in the proceedings; German unification had been a ‘revolution from above’.<sup>72</sup> The all-important choice of active commitment to one’s nation, which is part of modern citizenship, was absent. Those

---

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Matthew Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany, 1871-1918* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 44-53.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. David Blackbourn, *The Fontana History of Germany 1780-1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (London: Fontana Press, 1997), p. 256.

revolutionary aspects, as seen in Herder and Fichte, tended to get overlooked and the political writers of the century's first decades were either forgotten or vilified as Francophile. Our examination of key works by literary historians has demonstrated this: literature and literary criticism became the hand maiden of the new nation builders. They perceived their role as bearers of culture, a view that reached its climax in the famous declaration, issued at the start of World War I. This 'manifesto', signed by ninety-three eminent scientists and other public figures, in response to British propaganda that German culture and Prussian militarism were at odds with one another, stressed the unity of 'the German army and the German people' and solemnly proclaimed that 'we will fight this struggle to its end as a cultured nation to which the legacy of Goethe, Beethoven and Kant is just as sacred as our hearth and native soil'.<sup>73</sup> Far from participating in a meaningful nation-building process, this academic elite of 'mandarins' sought to accommodate themselves under the protection of the military and of the imperial court. By shielding themselves from international influence, they progressively abandoned what liberal and democratic values remained and contributed to the alleged 'encirclement' of Germany. Very few figures of international rank followed Nietzsche's vigorous opposition to the new political system; most of the German intelligentsia supported the new order.<sup>74</sup> While it could be argued that the establishment of the Second Reich failed to give Germans a genuine, workable national identity, its advocates failed to recognize the full implications of Germany's identity problem, as history was to illustrate in the following decades.

An examination of Germany's identity problem in the twentieth century goes beyond the scope of this paper. Neither the Weimar Republic, riven by political dissent and economic disaster, nor the one-party Third Reich could summon the political energies to give their country a new identity. It was only in the aftermath of World War II and under the guidance of her (western) allies that Germany began to adopt the kind of political culture which enabled it to find some kind of national identity. Indeed, it may have been fortunate that this development was delayed by Germany's division, giving this process sufficient time to mature. The role of German historians and literary critics has also changed. A new *Streitkultur* has replaced the mandarin desire to act as *Kulturträger*; their successors no longer desire the mandate to speak 'for the nation'. Instead, they have become critical guardians of a

---

<sup>73</sup> Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg and Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Aufruf 'An die Kulturwelt!'. Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg: mit einer Dokumentation* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), pp. 158 and 160.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Erste unzeitgemäße Betrachtung. Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. by Karl Schlechta, 3 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1962), 1, 135.

pluralist and liberal society which subsumes 'national interests' within a much wider spectrum of cultural and political values.