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**Is there a German History?**

**by**

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Ernest Renan once defined a nation in terms of its awareness of great common achievements in the past and its desire to do more together in the future. The deeds of the future and those of the past, he goes on to say in this well-known passage, are linked by a bond of historical continuity; therefore, a nation has to take possession of its history in order to be able to shape its future.<sup>1</sup>

We can find many examples of a close connection between a view of history and a blueprint for the future. The work of historians is one such instance. Their portrayals of history are often connected with their hopes and fears for the future, whether consciously or subconsciously.<sup>2</sup> Politicians provide another example. People listening to the German Bundestag debating the Brandt government's *Ostverträge* (treaties) with Poland and the Soviet Union on 22 March 1972 must have thought that they had stumbled upon an advanced seminar in the philosophy of history. At issue was not the exchange of ambassadors and the normalization of West Germany's relations with Eastern Europe. Instead, the discussion focused on Germany's future in Europe: was priority to be given to German reunification, 'in the borders of 1937', as the Christian Democrat opposition demanded (something that the *Ostverträge*, of course, made rather more unlikely), or was the main objective to be peace and *détente* in the whole of Europe, even at the expense of German hopes for reunification, as the coalition government wanted? Did the German people still want reunification, or was this issue completely dead?

There was talk of several possible German futures, and therefore also of several German pasts. Four quite different ideas of German history emerged from the debate.

Speaking for the opposition, Richard von Weizsäcker said that all German policy must be directed towards rebuilding the German national state as established by Bismarck in 1871. If the idea of the national state were to be abandoned, he said, the German identity would no longer have an adequate foundation.<sup>3</sup>

Protest was vehement and came from all camps. A speaker from the SPD referred to the difference between state and nation, and explained that in Bismarck's state, the majority of the nation had been oppressed. Anyone who wanted to appeal to German history in order to shape the future, he went on to say, should build on the liberal traditions of the peasants' revolts, the Enlightenment, the labour movement and the resistance to Hitler.<sup>4</sup>

Several speakers from southern Germany placed themselves in a totally different historical context. They pointed out that Germany had always consisted of many states, and even Bismarck's Germany had only crystallized as an alliance of the older German states.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the Social Democrat Carlo Schmid described the German national state as a short and terrible episode in German history. He claimed that the German national state was something historically given but almost obsolete already, merely a step on the path towards a European nation.<sup>6</sup>

## II

What a strange debate. And it was by no means unique: we find that discussions of German history crop up again and again in the proceedings of German parliaments, whether in the Frankfurt National Assembly of 1848, when the

future constitution of the German Reich was being negotiated, or in the Weimar National Assembly of 1919, when the signing of the Treaty of Versailles was under dispute. We find that whenever the points are being set for the future of German policy, people regularly start to look for German history. Every time, after long and learned debates, their search ends in the mists of uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> It is not only politicians who find it hard to agree on this question; historians, too, have difficulty with the continuities of German history. When the government of the Federal Republic of Germany announced its intention of setting up a German Historical Museum in Berlin, a dispute began among German historians debating the issue of which German history should be put on display. At the 1986 German Historians' Convention in Trier, the audience applauded the speaker who declared that nowadays one could no longer say what German history was. He went on to suggest that it would be better to exhibit Chinese history - then one would at least know what was being talked about.<sup>8</sup>

Doubts about 'Germany' are old. In 1796, Friedrich Schiller wrote: 'Germany? But where is it? I don't know how to find such a country ...'<sup>9</sup> Another poet, Heinrich Heine, expressed his difficulties with the idea of a German identity in the following words: 'Where does *Germanness* begin? Where does it end? May a German smoke? The majority says no ... But a German may drink beer, indeed as a true son of Germania he should drink beer ...'<sup>10</sup> And Prince Metternich, the real founder and ruler of the German Confederation, regarded the proposition that there was a German nation quite simply as a 'myth', a bad story.<sup>11</sup>

This uncertainty in defining a German identity contrasts sharply with the historical self-assurance of Germany's western neighbours. When the French nation, for example, looks at its history, then it always sees the same nation and the same history, the same facts and figures, the same myths: the thread of identity stretches from the Capetians to the present day. Indeed, the French President has called the place where the Gallic tribes came together under Vercingetorix to resist Rome 'haut-lieu de l'histoire de France' - an important site of French history.<sup>12</sup> Charlemagne and Joan of Arc, the Sun King and Danton are living present; Guibert de Nogent's eleventh-century *Gesta Dei per Francos* provides the model for French self-awareness to the present day; the memory of the storming of the Bastille in 1789 unifies the French people from the Communists to the Nouvelle Droite; and even the great criminals, Napoleon and Robespierre, have been vindicated to the greater glory of the *grande nation*. Of course, there is also a strong critical tradition in French historiography. Hardly a shrine of France's historical self-image has been left intact by French scholars, who have de-mythologized everything from the Revolution to the Resistance. But all this merely provides material for discussions that last for a summer. The French image of their history does not change; the slogans, eras, names and assessments are immovable, a sedimentary rock in the collective consciousness upon which unity and identity are founded.

This is, *mutatis mutandis*, the type of relationship that most European nations have with their history, unless dictators have imposed artificial views of history on them. This is certainly true for England, a country that takes its historical identity so much for granted that the *Encyclope-*

*dia Britannica* does not devote a single line of print to the term 'nation' - for obvious reasons. And even in Italy, a 'retarded nation' like Germany, the Risorgimento, the nineteenth-century movement for unification, is still seen as a struggle, projected back into the Middle Ages, for the creation of the Italian nation. The Italian sense of history, in fact, is strong enough even to tolerate monuments of the fascist era - the obelisk on the other side of the Milvian Bridge in Rome still announces, in huge letters, 'Mussolini Dux'. Nobody takes offence.

### III

What is different about the Germans? The answer is easy. In temporal terms they lack continuity; and in spatial terms they lack a centre and fixed borders. No other country in Europe has had so many capital cities: Aachen, Goslar, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, Bonn. The Germans lacked an area in which central power could unfold and which could serve it as a base. What the Seine basin was to France, the Rhine area could have been to Germany, except that the political centres had shifted to the east and, because of the unfavourable geographical situation, the big commercial centres had been displaced to the periphery, near the transalpine trading routes, or to the North Sea or the Baltic. Central Europe possessed many different legal and cultural forms as well as various types of land ownership as a legacy of the Roman *limes* and the medieval border marked by the River Elbe. It was settled not only by Germanic, but also by Celtic and Slavic tribes. And apart from a few kilometres of coastline, this amor-

phous tract of land had no permanent frontiers, either natural or political. 'The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered', says Fernand Braudel. 'From it all others flow. To draw a boundary around anything is to define, to analyse, and reconstruct it, in this case select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history.'<sup>13</sup>

In England and France, rudimentary forms of central power, the prerequisites of a modern, national state organization, developed early. In central Europe, by contrast, two political structures emerged simultaneously: one at a level of organization above that of the national state, the other below it. Both impeded the formation of a German nation-state. On the one hand, there was the Holy Roman Empire, which rested upon a basis of universal and transnational power; on the other hand, tribes and peoples grew into territorial states, whose strength and independence increased as the Holy Roman Empire degenerated into a powerless, almost metaphysical construct without state authority. The only early attempt to develop a unified German state in this area, made by the Habsburgs under Maximilian I and Charles V, failed. German unification fell victim to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. In all other European states the religious struggle was decided in favour of one side or the other, but in Germany it remained unresolved and the religious divisions created by the Reformation were, to a certain extent, perpetuated by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*. Thus religious fragmentation was added to the territorial fragmentation of central Europe. This situation remained stable until well into the eighteenth century, because after the Thirty Years War the rights and privileges of the more than 300 central European territories and free imperial cities were guaran-

teed by the international Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648. Since that date, the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire was considered part of the *ius publicum europaeum* (European international law) and, as such, it concerned all the European powers. It was in all their interests to prevent the emergence in central Europe of a modern centre of power that would threaten the existing balance of power. The territorial fragmentation of central Europe survived the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and Napoleon's reorganization of Europe. At the Congress of Vienna in 1820 it was solemnly reaffirmed as the foundation of the European peace. It did not come to an end until 1871, when the *kleindeutsche-großpreußische* Reich was established.

#### IV

Under these circumstances, what can 'German history' possibly mean? The subject of a German national history, a German nation, does not emerge from the mists of uncertainty during this whole period. The word *deutsch* derives from *thiutisk* (Latin: *teutonicus*), a term that originated in Bavaria and spread through central Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries. It simply meant 'the vernacular' - certainly not a homogeneous language, but a great variety of Germanic dialects distinct from both learned Church Latin and the Romance and Slavonic languages of Europe. The term *Regnum Teutonicum* appears as a political designation for the eastern Frankish empire since the days of Heinrich I, but only as one name among many: *Germania*, *Francia*, *Saxonia*, *Alamannia*, *Regnum Ger-*



manicum, Regnum Saxonum, Regnum Alamanniae. Pope Gregor VII, in the eleventh century, was the first to address the rex Romanorum as rex Teutonicorum, in order to bring the eastern Frankish emperor down to the level of a king like the Danish and French monarchs. The 'teutschen Lande', that is, those parts of the Holy Roman Empire in which the common people spoke a Germanic dialect, were not subsumed under the common name 'Deutschland' until the sixteenth century, when the humanists were seeking a vernacular word for what Tacitus, in his newly discovered writings, called Germania.

Relatively early, from the Middle Ages onwards, the word *deutsch* was used for those who could read and write German, to distinguish them from foreigners who spoke Latin or French and were felt to be *undeutsch*. It is this meaning that has stuck, giving the word *deutsch* a significance relating to language and culture and allowing it to serve as a term of demarcation. This starts with Walter von der Vogelweide and continues through the age of humanism and Luther to Leibniz. A new quality was injected around the middle of the eighteenth century, with the rise of a German *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated middle class) which, deliberately distancing itself from the French courtly culture of the period, perceived itself as German, wrote in German, and developed German into a standard language for the first time.<sup>14</sup>

The term 'nation', by contrast, referred to large tribes in the Middle Ages, and was subsequently transformed into a corporative constitutional concept: the 'deutsche Nation' consisted of the Estates of the Empire that gathered at the Imperial Diet in Regensburg - that is, the aristocracy and the clergy. The common people were

excluded.<sup>15</sup> Not until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the educated classes were more and more deliberately rejecting the French monopoly of culture, did terms come together in a modern way: the words *Nationalgeist* (national spirit), *Nationalstolz* (national pride), *Nationalcharakter* (national character) and *Nationalbewußtsein* (national consciousness) date from this period and became its key concepts. The 'German nation' that discovered itself by this route was, however, entirely a concern of the educated middle classes. 'Nation' was a purely cultural concept.<sup>16</sup>

## V

Much was needed to instil a sense of German identity, a feeling of belonging together as one nation, into the populations of central European states such as Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg, Lippe-Schaumburg, and Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: the upheavals of the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars, the disbanding of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the collapse of Prussia, a giant with feet of clay, on the battlefields of Jena and Auerstedt, and the Napoleonic occupation. Initially, however, this sense of national awareness was rooted in thoroughly negative feelings, born of antagonism towards the French 'arch enemy', the 'Corsican monster'. After Napoleon, the Germans knew what they were not - but what were they? Since even the name of the Empire had been wiped out in 1806, no unifying bond at all remained. One of the most popular songs of the period, in some respects Germany's first national anthem, was Ernst Moritz Arndt's 'Vater-

landslied' of 1813:

Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?  
Ists Preußenland, ist's Schwabenland?  
Ists, wo am Rhein die Rebe blüht?  
Ists, wo am Belt die Möve zieht?  
O nein! Nein! Nein!  
Sein Vaterland muß größer sein!

(Where is the German's fatherland? Is it Prussia, is it Swabia? Is it along the Rhine, where the vines bloom? Is it along the Belt, where the seagulls drift? Oh no! No! No! His fatherland must be larger.) In the many verses of his song, Arndt goes through province after province, asking in all innocence, 'Ists das Land der Schweizer? Ists Tirol?' (Is it the land of the Swiss? Is it the Tyrol?), until he comes to the conclusion:

Soweit die deutsche Zunge klingt,  
Und Gott im Himmel Lieder singt,  
Das soll es sein!  
Das, wackrer Deutscher, nenne Dein!

(Wherever the German language is heard, praising God in heaven, there shall it be! That, sturdy German, call your own!) Germany, therefore, continued to be defined exclusively in terms of language and culture. The newly discovered German nation possessed no borders and no body politic, for the German Confederation, founded in 1820 by European statesmen in Vienna, was born of a completely transnational spirit. Its members included, among others, the monarchs of England, Denmark and the Netherlands, and the national idea was considered a revolutionary principle.<sup>17</sup>

As the contemporary situation provided nothing for the newly awakened national idea to cling to and build upon, the German nation was created out of history as a Utopian projection. There proved to be many histories that could serve to legitimize the national future of Germany. For a start, there were the Greeks, rediscovered by Winckelmann as early as the mid-eighteenth century and since then regarded as essentially similar to the Germans. Had not the ancient Greeks and Romans been what the Germans and French were today? Today as then, did not a hegemonic, expansive state, rationally and effectively organized and administered, civilized but lacking in real culture and spirit, confront, in the east, an impotent jumble of states that nevertheless had spirit and humanity in abundance? As early as 1807 Wilhelm von Humboldt had described the similarity between Greece and Germany in his *Geschichte des Verfalls und Untergangs der griechischen Freistaaten*; for Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, who taught German youth that gymnastics would make them fit for the struggle against France, the Germans were a 'holy people' because of their similarity with the ancient Greeks.<sup>18</sup> And one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century was Johann Gustav Droysen's biography of Alexander the Great, published in 1833. This told the story of an empire in northern Greece, still half barbaric but capable of creating order among the chaos of small states in the south. The Greek empire thus unified provided the foundation for Alexander's fantastically successful campaign in the East, which imposed upon Asia the spirit of a Greek, that is, a higher humanity. Droysen's biography was on the shelves of almost every bourgeois library, and everyone knew that Macedonia stood for Prussia, Greece for Germany and

Asia for Europe. Indeed, the bourgeoisie was to recognize Alexander the Great in Bismarck; nineteenth-century German historiography had prepared the way for his rise.

The idea of a superior humanistic German culture, to be perfected in the nation state, was one of the great national ideologies of history; another was that of the German *Volk*. As early as the eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder had declared that *Völker*, that is, peoples, and not states or nations, were the natural social unit. According to Herder, the spirit of a people was of divine origin and manifested itself in the vernacular.<sup>19</sup> Thus the word *Volk*, which until then had been a derogatory name for the masses, was suddenly imbued with a romantic, if not holy, aura. Poets and scholars vied with each other to collect old epic poems and folk tales, in order to track down the spirit of the *Volk*. To this was added a totally different concept of the 'people', defined by the French Revolution in rational and political terms: the people as the Third Estate, the only embodiment of the nation and the legitimate sovereign of itself.<sup>20</sup> In Germany, these two streams, the romantic and the political folk ideologies, merged. In the winter of 1807-8, Johann Gottlieb Fichte gave his *Addresses to the German Nation* in French-occupied Berlin. In them, the Germans figure as the original, untainted *Volk*, fighting for freedom and identity against military subjugation, and even more, against cultural domination by the inferior French *Volk*. In doing this, Fichte claimed, the Germans were fulfilling a higher historical destiny.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of the German *Volk*, discovered more than a thousand years after Bede's *gens anglorum*, initially stood in the service of an oppositional, liberal idea of the

future. In Heinrich Luden's twelve-volume *Geschichte des Deutschen Volkes*, published from 1825 on, the *Volk* is the authority that stands in judgement on all state institutions, which have to justify themselves before it. Luden's vision of the future is the *Volkskaisertum* that the liberals of 1848 wanted to introduce: a democratic state with a monarch at its head.<sup>22</sup> But Luden speaks of the German *Volk* as equivocally as did Fichte before him: the German *Volk* is the most industrious and efficient of all, and its culture is the most highly developed. This idea was not totally new. In the age of humanism, writers such as Ulrich von Hutten and Johannes Wimpferling, referring to Tacitus's *Germania*, had already contrasted Germanic virtue with Roman decadence and moral corruption.<sup>23</sup> This idea was taken up again in the early nineteenth century. The German *Volk* was seen as directly descended from the Germanic *Volk*, and all the good qualities that Tacitus had attributed to the northern peoples now reappeared in the Germans: loyalty, modesty, moderation, bravery, simplicity - all this in contrast to the corrupted morals of their French neighbours. Nobody was bothered by the fact that the Germans had Slavic and Celtic ancestors as well as Germanic ones, or that the most successful Germanic peoples in history were not the Germans, but the English.

This Germanocentric restriction of the idea of the *Volk* already contains the virus that, as early as in Heinrich Luden, was brought to life by the statement that what a *Volk* really shared was not language at all, but blood. This level of argument had nothing to do with historical verification and led, by way of Gobineau's and Houston Stewart Chamberlain's racial theories, directly to the delusions of an Adolf Hitler.

## VI

Initially, to be sure, a different perspective on history proved to be more successful. The forces of opposition in Germany were divided along many lines, into liberals, democrats, republicans, socialists, Protestants and Catholics. But there was one vision of the future that, precisely because it was vague, ambiguous and could accommodate many different ideas, was able to bind together all the forces of change, reform and revolution for more than two generations: the Utopian dream of a nation-state for all the Germans.

When looking for a view of history that could legitimize and historically anchor the dream of a future state encompassing all the Germans, it was tempting to stop in the immediate past. There was Prussia, an authoritarian state organized along modern lines, whose rise, in the course of the eighteenth century, from a third-rate territorial state to a European great power had proved that the rigid European balance of power system could be broken down. Prussia had strengthened its claim to leadership in Germany by the resistance it had offered Napoleon and the lead it had taken in the 1813 wars of liberation. Above all, there was the myth of Frederick the Great, the wise king of Sanssouci, who had stood firm against an antagonistic world and whose victories over France and Russia had given the Germans their image of a hero.

A whole new generation of political historians now took up university appointments: Dahlmann in Bonn, Häuser in Freiburg, Duncker and Treitschke in Berlin, Droysen in Jena, and Sybel in Munich, all liberals and firmly convinced of Prussia's mission in Germany and the

perniciousness of south German, 'anti-national' Catholicism. These historians did not agree with Leopold von Ranke, who had denied that history held any lessons for the present. They were all politically active - as deputies in parliaments, as contributors to the leading newspapers, as university teachers ('academic prophets', a term that Max Weber was later to use for Treitschke), and above all, as historians, who shaped the image of history held by the Germans. Unlike most European liberals, they regarded the state not only as the natural product of historical forces, but also as the guardian of ethical values, without which culture and morality were not possible. In their view, no other state embodied this in so pure a form as Prussia,<sup>24</sup> as Droysen explained in his *Geschichte der Preußischen Politik* (started in 1855). Since the fifteenth century, declared Droysen, the rulers of Prussia, aware of its mission, had all followed a consistent political line. From this historiographically more than dubious argument he concluded that part of 'God's plan for the world' was for Prussia to bring the German nation-state to completion.<sup>25</sup>

Popular versions of these sorts of historical world images had a greater impact. They were published in editions numbering hundreds of thousands, and were snapped up by the reading public. One of the most popular was Franz Kugler's *Geschichte Friedrichs des Großen*, illustrated by Adolph von Menzel, which appeared in 1841. Frederick the Great, playing his flute at Sanssouci, old Fritz on horseback - these were archetypal images engraved upon the hearts of all Protestant Germans from the aristocracy to the workers. Perhaps they were no less important than the skills of the Prussian General Staff in deciding the outcome on the battlefields of Königgrätz and Sedan.



But the Prussian perspective on history had one flaw: while it incorporated the Protestant parts of Germany, it excluded the Catholic south, above all, Bavaria and Austria. From Potsdam, therefore, a straight path led back into the sparkling mists of an imaginary rather than a real medieval past, for that is where generations of German historians believed that they would find what they wanted to regain in the future: a brilliant and powerful German empire, whose head would stand above all the other rulers of Europe. Freiherr vom Stein had already called for this in his memorandum of 12 September 1812: 'In the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Germany was a powerful empire ... For the good of Europe in general and Germany in particular, it would be better by far to restore the medieval empire than to return to the German constitution established by the Peace of Westphalia.'<sup>26</sup> The idea was a popular one. Max von Schenkendorf, poet of the wars of liberation, wrote:

Deutscher Kaiser! Deutscher Kaiser!  
Komm zu rächen, komm zu retten,  
Löse Deiner Völker Ketten,  
Nimm den Kranz, Dir zugebracht!

(German Kaiser! German Kaiser! Come to take vengeance, come to save us, release your people from their chains, take the wreath that is awaiting you!) The German future lay in the Middle Ages. Schenkendorf's German Kaiser was not the Habsburg Emperor in Vienna, but Barbarossa, from the House of Hohenstaufen, who was waiting in the Kyffhäuser, a Thuringian mountain, and would return in Germany's hour of greatest need to re-establish its erstwhile greatness.

Medieval history became a national passion. Freiherr vom Stein founded the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, a collection of German medieval documents that historians are still working on today. The *Nibelungenlied*, Germany's answer to the *Iliad*, began its triumphal progress as a monument of German national literature, and Johannes Voigt's *Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens*, Friedrich von Raumer's *Geschichte der Hohenstaufen* and Heinrich Stenzel's work on the Frankish emperors, all first published in the 1820s, were reprinted in enormous runs and avidly consumed by the reading public, just as romances had been in the past. This picture of the Middle Ages was crowned by Wilhelm Giesebrecht's six-volume *Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserzeit*, published from 1855 on. The time of the medieval emperors, wrote Giesebrecht in the foreword, was 'the period 'at which our people, strong in its unity, achieved the pinnacle of its power. Not only did it freely command its own destiny, but it also had control over other peoples at this time, when being German counted for something in the world and the name of Germany had the fullest ring.' <sup>27</sup>

The impact of this image of the Middle Ages cannot be overestimated. There was no area of culture, high or popular, that was not permeated by it. Poets and novelists vied with each other to create a romantic, heroic picture of the Middle Ages, featuring the dazzling splendour of the Kaiser and the condition of Christian piety and simplicity, without conflict or friction, in which all classes lived. Evil always came from outside, as the result of Roman intrigues or French moral corruption. This image was taken up by dramatists and opera composers. Operas such as Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* and Richard Wagner's

*Die Meistersinger* were as popular as Broadway musicals are today. The many national monuments erected all over Germany, from Cologne cathedral, completed at last, to the *Festsaal* of the Marienburg in West Prussia and Schinkel's Kreuzberg monument in Berlin were all cast in a Gothic style which, it was assumed, was authentically and originally German and was to be revived in contemporary architecture.<sup>28</sup>

Thus it came about that the long desired German national state, established in 1871, was largely born out of the spirit of this image of the Middle Ages. The hereditary President of the new state called himself a Kaiser, although he had absolutely no connection with the last Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire, Francis II; the re-established German Confederation called itself a Reich, although it had nothing to do with the transnational or religious spirit of the Holy Roman Empire. Enthusiastic supporters of the new Reich called William I 'Barbablanca' - the white-bearded Prussian king was to be seen as a reincarnation of Frederick Barbarossa,<sup>29</sup> although he himself had never thought of establishing an empire, and regarded the day on which he was proclaimed German Emperor at Versailles as the unhappiest day of his life because it witnessed the end of the old Prussia. His son, the liberal Kaiser of a hundred days, Frederick III, thought in much more modern terms. He wanted to be known as Frederick IV, so that he would fit into the series of numbers used for the old Kaisers. And his successor, William II, an unhappy man in every respect, modelled his 'world politics' on those of Otto the Great, believing that the medieval universality of the Reich legitimized early-twentieth-century German imperialism.<sup>30</sup> The German Reich of 1871, which became

one of Europe's leading industrial powers, almost without equal in terms of economic and scientific modernity, was a conjuring up of the dead.

What makes this historical world view so interesting in retrospect is not only its political consequences. Using the past to legitimize the present in this way was not an exclusively German phenomenon. It was a common European practice during the nineteenth century. French, Italian, Polish, Czech and Greek historians did exactly the same thing when they felt it necessary to underpin the future of their national ambitions by constructing traditions that led back directly to the Middle Ages or Antiquity. In some cases, such as those of the Greek and Slavic nations, these attempts were manifestly artificial and fictitious. But France and England, for example, really could trace a historical continuity back to the early Middle Ages, and in other cases, such as those of Greece and Italy, the continuity of a cultural or at least a geographical framework was a fact. For Germany, none of this applied, or at least, it applied to a much lesser extent. It led to an excess of historical introspection, which in turn supported and encouraged excessive political programmes for the future. After all if, according to Giesebrecht, the medieval Kaisers had controlled other peoples, why should the Kaiser of the new German Reich not do the same thing?

It is more surprising, however, that German historiography, whose positivistic virtues and critical use of sources had been regarded as exemplary even beyond Europe in the nineteenth century, was now incapable of criticizing the myths that it had itself created. The Germanic peoples were naively identified with the Germans. Terms such as *deutsch* and *Nation* were greeted with rapture wherever

they appeared in medieval sources, and no attempt was made to subject them to sober and critical analysis. Knowledge that the medieval Holy Roman Empire, which was not German and *völkisch*, but Christian and Roman (despite Giesebrecht, a 'German Empire' or a 'German Middle Ages' never existed) was being used to legitimize the present was suppressed. Until well into the twentieth century this tissue of myths was regarded as established historical fact and had never been the subject of a real scholarly controversy. The biggest nineteenth-century debate on the German view of history took place in 1861 between the Munich historian Heinrich von Sybel and his colleague in Innsbruck, Julius von Ficker. At issue were their assessments of the policies pursued by medieval emperors, but the debate did not concentrate on the question of 'wie es eigentlich gewesen'. Instead, it focused on whether the Hohenstaufen emperors had been right to look to Italy (as Ficker, who supported the *großdeutsche* idea and the Habsburgs, thought), or whether they should have paid more attention to German domestic policy and colonizing the east (as Sybel, who supported the Prussian, *kleindeutsche* idea, thought). This historians' dispute was not about facts, but about political judgements, which has made it a model for further disputes between German historians, right up to the present day.<sup>31</sup>

## VII

German historians created various interpretations of German history in the course of the nineteenth century. They had a political impact and continued to be effective as long

as there was a German national state, that is, until 1945. In retrospect, it is fascinating to observe how strongly this state, which was created almost by chance and existed for less than eighty years, has dominated thinking on German history as a whole. The second German Reich was seen as the point at which German history had been aiming, its teleological goal. Even after 1871, however, it retained its Utopian qualities, for after all, German history could not be over yet. After external unity had been achieved, internal unity must follow. Solutions had to be found to all the social, economic, political, religious and regional conflicts that made up the sobering reality of Bismarck's Reich. We can see in the work of Friedrich Meinecke, for example, how important the national state was to a liberal German historian, for only this sort of state could unify the nation internally. Thus there was no inconsistency in the attitude of Meinecke and other national liberal historians who saw William II's reign as a disaster because under his rule social and political injustices increased, while they welcomed the outbreak of the First World War because they believed that only under its pressure could the unification of the German state be completed.<sup>32</sup>

And when the war had been lost and the Weimar Republic was plunged into civil war, the path to the national state remained at the centre of historical thinking. Now it was the nineteenth century that provided reference points for the present and the future: resistance to Napoleon, the wars of liberation in 1813, the Prussian reforms, seen in the context of a liberal renewal of domestic policy, and the *großdeutsche* idea which, during the Weimar Republic, was regarded by German and Austrian democrats and Socialists as offering a way out of the miseries of the

present. And when the perspectives of German politics changed radically with Hitler's seizure of power, when the future was no longer to be the hegemony of a national state in the centre of Europe, but world domination by the Germanic race, the national view of history required only relatively minor adjustments: in the works of historians, Hegelian state absolutism gave way to Fichte's idea of the Germanic-German *Urvolk*. Even historians who had once been decidedly liberal, such as Wilhelm Mommsen and Siegfried Kähler, now wrote enthusiastically about the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) that, after all the upheavals of the Weimar Republic, would at last give the nation inner unity. Of course, many democratic and Jewish historians were forced to emigrate, and some lost their university posts or had to retire from public life. On the whole, however, German historians survived the Third Reich relatively unmolested. Their perspectives on history were useful to the brown-shirted rulers.<sup>33</sup>

## VIII

That was the 'German catastrophe', as Friedrich Meinecke described the years of Nazi rule and its consequences. The catastrophe that Meinecke referred to in his 1946 essay<sup>34</sup> consisted not only of the political and military events of the time, but primarily of the split between national history and public morality, between power and spirit. The images of German national history had contained great promise for the future of the German nation; the reality was defeat, failure and crime. National dreams of a Reich for all the Germans had turned into the nightmare of Adolf Hitler's

Großdeutsches Reich; in reality, the unity of the German *Volk* had meant the suppression, persecution and murder of outsiders and minorities; the extraordinary, the unprecedented things that had been done in the name of the German people turned out to be the abominations of Auschwitz and Treblinka - and the necessary consequence was the destruction of the German national state.

The Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt once ironized the victorious whitewashing of German history; when the whitewash wore off, German history fell apart. When Alfred Heuss spoke of a 'loss of history' in 1959, he did not mean only that the Germans had lost interest in their historical roots. He was also bewailing the fact that one of the lines of German history that led from the Middle Ages to the present day was no longer recognizable. The future of the nation was broken and national history, therefore, pointless.<sup>35</sup>

The realization that this situation also allowed people to develop new ways of looking at German history did not dawn until relatively late. The Fritz Fischer debate shows what great moral value was still attached to the national state, even in the early 1960s. This debate was sparked off by Fischer's thesis that the German Reich must take the largest share of blame for the outbreak of the First World War. In this controversy, too, moral indignation overshadowed historiographical issues.<sup>36</sup> But interpretations of German history orientated by the idea of the national state gave way to others as new perspectives opened up. Economic and social history, above all, became increasingly important, in line with international developments in historiography. In Germany they were especially successful because a whole generation of younger historians put



forward the idea that the reasons for the 'German catastrophe' were to be sought primarily in socio-economic developments specific to Germany since the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> As a result, however, the *legenda aurea* of traditional national history was replaced by a *legenda nigra* of a bad, unsuccessful German *Sonderweg*. But this interpretation remained totally within the traditional framework determined by the idea of the national state. Thomas Nipperdey's polemical attack on the master of German 'historical sociology', Hans-Ulrich Wehler, which climaxed in Nipperdey calling Wehler 'Treitschke redivivus',<sup>38</sup> was not based on pure invention. Other historians took further the old perspective on history developed by the German labour movement: there was not *one* German history, but two. One strand was good, progressive and emancipatory. It led from the peasants' revolts of the early sixteenth century to the Enlightenment, the 1848 revolution, the rise of the labour movement and its political parties, incorporated the resistance to Nazism and the inmates of the concentration camps, and, according to the liberal and social democratic version, culminated in the promulgation of the Grundgesetz (Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany) in Bonn, while according to a more Marxist interpretation, it will lead to a socialist and radical democratic future in the Federal Republic. The second of the two strands of German history is bad, because it was reactionary, exploitative and repressive, and culminated in capitalism and Fascism. For a time, this interpretation enjoyed government support, most visibly in the establishment of the Gedenkstätte der deutschen Freiheitsbewegungen (Memorial to the German Freedom Movements) in Rastatt, a German Historical Museum of

the 1970s.<sup>39</sup> Attempts to revive the traditions of the old Reich histories and to argue that a Christian West would provide a barrier against Communism and Soviet imperialism were less successful.<sup>40</sup> Since the end of the 1970s this supranational approach has been matched by an attempt to find historical continuity at a level below that of the national state. Regional and local history have blossomed, and studying one's *Heimat* has become historically respectable. *Alltagsgeschichte*, 'history from below', is seen as offering a challenge to traditional political and diplomatic history.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, the assumptions of the old national history were ruthlessly, often radically, revised. Celts and Slavs were promoted to equality with the Germanic peoples, and Roman influence on the Germanic tribes during the *Völkerwanderung*, the period of migrations, was emphasized. It has now been generally accepted that the foundations of the Holy Roman Empire had little to do with the principles of the nation-state, and similarly, that the crucial period between the *ancien régime* and the revolutionary nineteenth century represented an important division between the old Reich and the German national state. The national state created by Bismarck, too, has lost its former aura of glory. Historical research shows it to have been riven by social and regional divisions, and held together mainly by the liberal political parties, by economic success and leaders who were constantly prepared to stage a *coup d'état*. The earlier hypothesis of continuity has given way to the insight that the history of central Europe is riddled with sharp breaks. The difficulty of finding a German history referred to earlier is rooted not only in politics, but also in the actual substance of history.<sup>42</sup>

## IX

For some time, the people of West Germany found it easy to repress history, to make the most of the present with its high economic growth rates and increasing prosperity for everyone. They looked with some surprise at the rest of the world, where the principles of national identity continued unbroken and proved their political effectiveness from day to day. But all this has changed since the mid 1970s. The Federal Republic of Germany's unquestioning participation in a stable system of alliances came to an end, as did the long economic boom of the post-war period. Society was convulsed by unrest, *Angst*, a loss of identity and direction. At times like these, the need for a collective identity grows. What are the people who live in the Federal Republic of Germany: are they Germans, West Germans, Federal Republicans, West Europeans, Europeans? Where do they belong: to the Atlantic West or to the European centre? Where does their future lie: in the Western alliance dominated by the USA, in a Europe for the Europeans, a central Europe between East and West, or a reunified Germany?

The search for an identity that we have been witnessing in Germany for several years, reflected in the huge runs in which historical series are published and in the enormous success of historical exhibitions, is a phenomenon of both left and right. While conservatives seek the lost national state, pacifists and Greens dream of a German oasis of peace in the centre of Europe, a peaceful confederation embracing both German states. In some respects, the situation is similar to that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the search for a new direction for the future

led to the discovery of a national past. 'The Germans', said Nietzsche, 'are a people of yesterday and tomorrow - they do not yet possess a today.'<sup>43</sup> And this is true not only of West Germany, but also of East Germany. There, too, the German past is being rediscovered, in an often surprisingly traditional and uncritical way, and enlisted to legitimize 'actually existing socialism'.<sup>44</sup>

Growing dangers attend this return to history combined, as it is, with the increased potency of the German national question. Wherever an awareness of the nation is reawakened, there the myths and legends proliferate again. Evidence is accumulating of the existence of a separate German awareness, of a belief that Germany has a special mission between East and West in the centre of Europe. Now that the long post-war period has come to an end and the search for a national history has started, historians should be critically examining political aspirations, not simply accommodating them as their nineteenth-century predecessors did. Today a unified, streamlined picture of German national history can no longer be drawn. Breaks in tradition and discontinuities make this impossible, as does the knowledge that in a pluralistic and democratic society, a unified national view of history is ineffective. Today we can no longer ask: what is German history? Instead, we must put the question thus: what are the limits within which we can discuss German history? It is obvious that the German national state cannot provide the standard against which to measure German history as Richard von Weizsäcker claimed in the German Bundestag in 1972. If this were the case, there would be no German history until the national state appears as a clearly defined objective - that is, not until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

But continuities do go back to earlier times, despite all the political upheavals. Central Europe, as a geographical area, is a political unit in a negative sense in that, in contrast to the European periphery, it was a colourful patchwork of states until 1871 and, since 1945, has fallen apart into several states again. For centuries, the fragmentation of central Europe was a condition of the European balance of power and thus served the interests of all the European states. It follows that the history of this area with its diverse, confusing and overlapping political structures can only be understood in the context of the history of the whole of Europe.

In order to allow it to find its context, therefore, German history must be de-nationalized. This also applies to the second strand of historical continuity, that of cultural history, for despite the territorial fragmentation of central Europe, there is a continuous German-language tradition going back to the Middle Ages. To quote Nietzsche again: it is characteristic of the Germans that they do not let the question of what is really German die. But there is an answer to this question: the German language. Here too, however, we must beware of any attempt to impose national limits. The German language was originally a vernacular language. The most important medieval cultural documents in this language could not have been created without ideas and direct translations from the French - this is true of *Minnesang* as well as of courtly romances, almost all of which derive from the west European Arthurian legends. This direct or indirect dependence on other literatures remains typical of German cultural history. Latin, French, Spanish and English literature take turns in providing models. Even the culture of the Weimar Repub-

lic, whose admirers regard it as typically German, is unthinkable without the French *fin de siècle* avant-garde and transatlantic popular culture. The development of the German language and German literature is conceivable only in the context of European culture; without this truly cosmopolitan culture, neither the German *Bildungsbürgertum* of the eighteenth century nor the German national state of the nineteenth century could have come into being. There is another, wider reason for de-nationalizing German cultural history: how else can we speak today of Austria, of German-speaking Switzerland or of Alsace, without being accused of *großdeutsche* ambitions?

## X

In order to cast some light on the relationship between the European and the German, we shall finally call upon an observer whose authority in this area is undisputed, someone who, positioned on the threshold between the cosmopolitan eighteenth century and the nationalist nineteenth century, was well placed to look backwards as well as forwards. In 1808 the Royal Bavarian education authorities planned to produce a collection of German national literature in order to standardize what was being taught because, they said, 'we completely lack the things that naturally bind a nation together, a common interest in national cultural property, in national songs. Thus we also lack the most natural common educational materials.'<sup>45</sup> They turned to the greatest expert of the times, to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and asked him to undertake this project.

Goethe was interested. Although nothing came of it, he did make some notes, which perhaps explain why a German national book could not be created with his help in the period of incipient nationalism. 'No nation, perhaps the German nation least of all, has created itself out of itself', reads one of Goethe's scattered notes. Elsewhere he comments: 'If we consider how few nations ... can lay claim to absolute originality, the German who has received his education abroad has no need to be ashamed. After all, we have made foreign cultural property our own. Indeed, one would have to refer explicitly to the achievements of foreign nations, because the book is intended for children who, especially now, must be made aware early enough of the achievements of foreign nations.' And finally: 'The German does not need a national education; he has a cosmopolitan one.'<sup>46</sup>

Goethe could see what we have painfully had to relearn after the disintegration of the German national state: that at all times German politics and German culture have been dependent on the influences of European politics and European cultures, influences that poured into the centre of Europe from all sides, were taken up and developed there and then passed on. Perhaps it is only our traditional Eurocentric perspective that makes the question of German history seem so difficult to us. In the context of Europe, in any case, German history gains what it lacks as national history: individuality and continuity.

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*Translated from the German by Angela Davies*