

# UC Davis

## UC Davis Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Enlightened National Imaginings: Exploring Concepts of German Nation around 1800

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59z555qd>

### ISBN

9798297645936

### Author

Davis, Adam Christopher

### Publication Date

2025-09-21

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Enlightened National Imaginings: Exploring Concepts of German Nation around 1800

By

ADAM CHRISTOPHER DAVIS  
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

German

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

Approved:

---

Elisabeth Krimmer

---

Chunjie Zhang

---

Sven-Erik Rose

Committee in Charge

2025

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Elisabeth Krimmer, as well as my dissertation committee members, Professor Chunjie Zhang and Professor Sven-Erik Rose, for their patience, guidance, and dedication throughout this process.

A very special thank you goes to my fiancée, Emily, for your unwavering love and support. I am incredibly fortunate to have such a kind and devoted partner. You stood by my side during these arduous years, and I cannot wait to share the future with you. Love you heaps.

I am deeply grateful to my parents, Jeff and Tina, for their constant love and encouragement. Thank you for all that you do.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Jeffrey L. High, whose guidance has been invaluable throughout my academic career.

Lastly, I want to give a shout-out to Dr. Jeffrey Jarzomb for being both a steadfast colleague and a solid friend throughout the years.

## Abstract

This dissertation examines the formation of German national identity around 1800 by analyzing how intellectuals—Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), and Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811)—conceptualized nationalism and patriotism in response to Enlightenment thought, the Napoleonic Wars, and the political realities and constraints of the German speaking *Kleinstaaterei*. Drawing on cultural, linguistic, and literary frameworks, as well as depictions of war, revolution, and resistance, this project situates these authors within broader debates on the moral and political dimensions of nationalism. Engaging theories from scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernst Gellner, Nenand Miscevic, and Igor Primoratz, I highlight the dual potential of nationalism and patriotism as both emancipatory forces grounded in egalitarian ideals and as exclusionary, violent movements tied to colonial and imperial practices. This analysis underscores how German literary productions contributed to the “imagined community” of a nation-in-formation, while also revealing the enduring tension between inclusive and chauvinistic visions of belonging.

This dissertation also traces the function and conception of nationalism as far back as the 10th to 15th centuries, following arguments advanced by Caspar Hirschi and Herfried Münkler. Their work informs my discussion of the relationship between nation-building and the patriotic or nationalistic practices of reimagining and remythologizing the past. Such myth-making frequently draws on one of the earliest extant texts concerning the origins of the Germanic peoples: Tacitus’ *Germania* (98 CE). I argue that the representations of “Germanness” in *Germania*, and their reception by German humanists, decisively shaped the trajectory of German

national ideation into the 18th and 19th centuries—most notably in Kleist’s remythologization of the Arminius saga

Chapter one examines Johann Gottfried Herder’s and Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s divergent conceptions of the German nation. While both emphasize a cultural and linguistic revival as central to German identity, Herder grounds his vision in a theory of language, history, and *Humanität*—a progressive concept of humanity—, advocating for a liberal and egalitarian nationalism that resists colonialism, slavery, and authoritarian overreach. He conceives of the nation as a cultural and linguistic community whose intrinsic value lies in its capacity to foster human freedom and diversity. Fichte, by contrast, although similarly invested in revitalizing German culture, articulates in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808) in a more ethnically defined and politically reactive nationalism, shaped by the French occupation. His thought oscillates between exclusionary, ethnic criteria and occasional gestures toward a more inclusive, liberal nationalism, rendering his position markedly inconsistent.

Chapter two explores Friedrich Schiller’s conception of the nation through the lens of his aesthetic philosophy and moderate patriotism. Seeking to reconcile Enlightenment rationality with emotional expression, Schiller advances the idea of an aesthetic education capable of transforming society into a *Menschenrepublik*. Written in the wake of the French Revolution, his *Aesthetic Letters* (1795) and later dramas—including *Wilhelm Tell* (1804)—articulate a vision of republican community rooted in beauty, freedom, and resistance to tyranny. Schiller’s synthesis of aesthetics and politics thus contributes to an egalitarian, democratic notion of the German nation, aligning with what Herder termed a “purified patriotism.”

Chapter three investigates Heinrich von Kleist’s paradoxical nationalism, which combines fervent calls for resistance with a subversive critique of violent patriotism. In works

such as *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1808), *Germania an ihre Kinder* (1809), and the *Katechismus der Deutschen* (1809), Kleist remythologizes the Arminius saga to frame anti-Napoleonic resistance, yet his depictions of excess, brutality, and moral compromise undermine the very nationalist fervor they appear to promote. Unlike Fichte, Kleist defines the nation through sovereignty and emancipation rather than ethnicity, aligning with liberal arguments for remedial rights against oppression. At the same time, his portrayal of Hermann reveals the destructive extremes of chauvinistic nationalism, exposing the dangers of rebellion corrupted by violence and excess. Kleist's vision of the German nation thus oscillates between advocacy for liberation and a nihilistic warning about the perils of resistance and wanton patriotic fervor.

## Contents

Introduction: Nations and Nationalism.....	1
National Ideations Circa 1800.....	7
Chapter Outline .....	13
Chapter 1: Idealistic Conceptions of the Nation in the Works of Herder.....	21
Language and Nation in Herder's Philosophy .....	30
Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762- 1814) .....	41
Herder on History and Politics.....	52
Herder and Eurocentrism .....	64
Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität.....	68
Chapter 2: Schiller's Aesthetic Revolution.....	77
Schiller's Aesthetic and Moral Philosophies .....	81
Purified Patriotism in <i>Wilhelm Tell</i> .....	98
Schiller's Idealistic Revolution .....	113
Conclusion.....	132
Chapter 3: Kleist's Subversive Patriotism: Anti-Napoleonic Rage and the German Nation .....	135
Theoretical Contributions to Kleist's Life Plan .....	138
Anti-Occupation Rhetoric .....	148
(Re)mythologizing the Arminius Saga.....	160
Subversion in <i>Die Hermannsschlacht</i> .....	164
Conclusion: Remarks on the Trajectory of Nationalism.....	188
Bibliography .....	196

## Introduction: Nations and Nationalism

This dissertation focuses on ideations of nationalism and patriotism in the context of German *Kleinstaaterei* around 1800. I aim to analyze how leading German philosophers, writers, and dramatists of the period conceptualized and portrayed the nascent abstraction of ‘nation’ in their literary productions. These representations played a crucial role in shaping a unified German nation from a landscape of fragmented states. My analysis focuses on the works of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), and Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811). Specifically, I examine, on the one hand, a linguistically and culturally informed sense of nation and, on the other hand, a concept of nation tied to explicit depictions and even celebrations of war, revolution, and violent conflict. The formations of patriotism and nationalism presented by these authors contribute to a larger nexus of German national imaginings circa 1800. Integral to these ideas is the negotiation between progressive Enlightenment era philosophies—individual rights, scientific discovery, self-cultivation, social and political revolution—and the violence and warfare that accompanied European colonial and imperial endeavors.

There is an intimate link between the emergence of the modern nation-state and nationalism, and these Enlightenment-era philosophies. Although the Enlightenment promised progress and egalitarianism, war and oppression persisted. Indeed, many nationalistic movements of the era are direct responses to oppression and abuses of power. In the early 1800s, the devastation caused by the Napoleonic Wars and foreign occupation gave rise to reactionary nationalism and fervent patriotism. Prior to these events, however, German writers promoted

egalitarian conceptions of nationalism based on linguistic and cultural parameters. An exploration of these contrasting notions of nationalism is at the core of this project.

When viewed from a contemporary perspective, the concept of nationalism has left an indelible mark on modern history. In almost all political conflicts in modern nation-states during the last three centuries, nationalism has played a key role. Today, an increasingly polarized political environment has fostered exclusionary and xenophobic forms of nationalism and patriotism. In common parlance, the word “nationalism” now bears negative connotations, evoking a legacy of bloodshed, ignorance, and intolerance. To speak of nationalism today is to speak of ever-expanding exclusionary practices carried out by majority groups in the name of the “nation.” To a large extent, nationalism is predicated upon a binary of “in” and “out” groups—those who belong to the nation and those who do not. At the same time, nationalism, as we understand it today, touches on a myriad of social, cultural, and political variables, making it a rather complex phenomenon. Nenad Miscevic writes in his entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that,

The term ‘nationalism’ is generally used to describe two phenomena: 1. The attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and 2. The actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

Miscevic’s first point includes exclusionary forms of nationalism, while the second point opens the door to a type of national identity that is rooted in and compatible with a desire for freedom and self-determination and thus implies a revolutionary potential. Sovereignty built on a sense of a collective, national identity offers a way out of systems of oppression. The American and French revolutions, with their proclamations for liberty and equal rights, are prime examples.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism/> (Accessed 12 April 2025)

Indeed, many nationalist movements are forged in the face of oppression. This remains as true today as it was in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I argue that, in such cases, nationalism can constitute a positive force. In his entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Mescevic points to links between justice, the right to self-defense, and nationalism.

Oppression and injustice give the victimized group a just cause and the right to secede. If a minority group is oppressed by the majority to the extent that almost every minority member is worse off than most members of the majority simply in virtue of belonging to the minority, then nationalist claims on behalf of the minority are morally plausible and potentially compelling.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of a collective identity forged in the face of oppression allows for a more flexible, liberal brand of nationalism, which stands in contrast to Mescevic's notion of "classical nationalism" defined as "the political program that sees the creation and maintenance of a fully sovereign state owned by a given ethno-national group ("people" or "nation") as a primary duty of each member of the group."<sup>3</sup> "Liberal nationalism," on the other hand, need not adhere to a strict ethno-national grouping but instead is concerned with self-determination, political sovereignty, democratic principles, and emancipation, etc. Although the possibility of a more liberal brand of nationalism is plausible, in reality, the two sides are often intertwined, rendering a distillation of a purer, progressive form of nationalism somewhat tenuous. Of course, nationalism in its "classical" form has historically fostered the formation of violent and xenophobic movements. Thus, the contemporary moral debate surrounding nationalism remains salient. Miscevic continues,

The moral debate on nationalism reflects a deep moral tension between solidarity with oppressed national groups on the one hand and repulsion in the face of crimes perpetrated in the name of nationalism on the other. Moreover, the issue of nationalism points to a wider domain of problems related to the treatment of ethnic and cultural differences

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

within democratic polity, arguably among the most pressing problems of contemporary political theory.<sup>4</sup>

It is this moral tension that I wish to explore in the German context around 1800. But before I begin to examine how national identities are formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, I will discuss the historically changing meanings of the terms “nation” and “identity.”

Usage of the term ‘nation’ can be traced back to the Roman Empire, where it served mainly as an indicator of birth within a certain territory. As the Swiss historian Caspar Hirschi explains, “*Natio* is derived from *nasci*, which means ‘to be born’. Romans used the word to indicate their place or province of birth within the Roman Empire” (Hirschi 78). Hirschi notes that, in its Roman usage, the term “lacked positive political or emotional meaning.” Rather, it was used pejoratively, designating foreign populations, which were seen as inferior to the civilized populations of the empire (Hirschi 78). It was not until the fifteenth century that the word began to connote language and culture. Hirschi continues, “[a]s early as around 1450 and as a provincial result of a complex semantic change, a frequent translation for Latin ‘*natio*’ was ‘tongue’ (or ‘tongues’), meaning both a specific language and the people speaking it as their mother tongue” (12). Hirschi points out that, in the early modern period, the term was still used dichotomously to differentiate between foreign and domestic groups. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards into the Age of Enlightenment, concepts of the nation became more and more intertwined with linguistic, cultural, and religious matters.

From the semantic evolution of the word “nations,” we can posit that a national identity is created predominantly via the culture of a given territory, including common language, traditions, but also often including ethnicity. Culture, however, can also be observed on a sub-

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

national level, for example, as differing from village to village. Thus, while culture plays a significant role in the formation of national identity, it is not its sole or uniform determinant. To assume that formations of national identity are homogenous within any given territory would be misleading. Moreover, identity is itself a tenuous concept informed by many variables, which are constantly in flux; national identity, like individual identity, is protean and relies on a myriad of ever-shifting components. This, of course, raises questions about the endogeneity of nationalism and the nation-state as we know it today.

Contemporary scholarship on nationalism was in its heyday in the 1980s with prominent figures, such as the British-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner (1925-1995), the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012), and the Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson (1936-2015).<sup>5</sup> The prolific scholarship of these groundbreaking theorists is impossible to ignore in any conversation about nationalism; it is also instrumental in my analysis of the contributions of German literary figures to German national identity around 1800. Perhaps the most salient and relevant theory to emerge from this time is Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community."

As the title of Benedict Anderson's seminal book so aptly puts it, *Imagined Communities* speaks to a collective awareness of, or desire for, community. Anderson postulates that national imaginings are created via communally shared experiences—people contribute to ideations of nation via their consumption and production of cultural output (literature, music, art, etc.).

Anderson states further that this process, which started in the early modern era with the

---

<sup>5</sup> It is Ernest Gellner who notably postulates in *Nations and Nationalism* that "it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round" (55).

proliferation of printing, drastically changed the way people conceptualize and interact within their communities. Anderson writes,

Why this transformation should be so important for the birth of the imagined community of the nation can best be seen if we consider the basic structure of [...] imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper. For these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation. (24-25)

Anderson postulates that communities, on a wide scale, participate in a homogeneous experience of imagining via shared readership of newspapers and novels. He continues,

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

Anderson's now widely known notion of the "imagined community" is helpful in my analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German literary ideations of the nation. The literary figures and concomitant works that I analyze throughout this dissertation reflect on the socio-political situations in which they were produced and disseminated, thus contributing to an imagined community. This is especially salient in Schiller and Kleist, whose historical revolutionary dramas speak to a desire and vision for a unified Germany. Indeed, the proliferation of literature was a key factor in the establishment of a German national identity circa 1800.

Along with Anderson's assessment of the advent of nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hobsbawm and Gellner also contribute to our understanding of concepts of the nation. Hobsbawm, in particular, offers a helpful timeline of the development of European nationalistic movements. He identifies three distinct phases of European nationalistic progression in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. In his book *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Hobsbawm defines “phase A” as the infancy of nationalism. Here, nationalism was conceived primarily along cultural, folkloric, and literary lines. “Phase B” refers to “militants of ‘the national idea,’” and in “phase C,” nationalist programs “acquire mass support” (12). These phases align with the three concepts of nationalism promoted by the three authors discussed in this study. As Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm suggest, much compelling evidence points to 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as the birthplace of the modern nation-state.

#### National Ideations Circa 1800

The latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ushered in an era of political revolution and social and religious change in Europe. Spurred on by the emerging philosophies of the Enlightenment, a new sense of identity and agency swept across Europe. Kant’s maxim, *sapere aude*, sought to push individuals out of their “self-imposed immaturity.” This reassessment of values had far-reaching consequences. The program of the Enlightenment prioritized notions of natural law over theological structures of power. Enlightenment thinkers sought to abolish oppressive monarchies in favor of democratic institutions of governance with a keen eye on individual rights, nation-building, and emancipatory endeavors. These core principles are perhaps made most abundantly clear in the American *Declaration of Independence* and the French *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*, both of which emphasize egalitarian principles: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Stephen Bronner notes in *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*,

Liberal republicanism and democratic socialism both have their roots in the Enlightenment. Its partisans were in the forefront of those contesting the exercise of arbitrary power by unaccountable institutions. But they also contributed to the

transformation of civil society through their attack on elementary forms of cruelty, religious dogmatism, illiteracy, superstition, xenophobia, and impolite behavior. (109)

This revolutionary atmosphere created a fertile ground for Germans who were eager to forge a unified German nation. Yet, while modern democracies are deeply indebted to the Enlightenment, its legacy is complex.

European trade and exploration, as inherent components of the nation-building enterprise, are inextricably tied to and implicated in the transgressions of European colonialism and imperialism. While the theoretical foundation of the Enlightenment promised freedom, equality, and justice, its practical implementation relied on oppression, abuse of power, and exploitation. Europe's economic and imperial expansion from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards violated enlightened notions of human rights. Gellner points out that, "[t]here is [...] a link between nationalism and the processes of colonialism, imperialism and de-colonization. The emergence of industrial society in Western Europe had as its consequence the virtual conquest of the entire world by European powers, and sometimes by European settler populations" (42). Thus, while the Enlightenment was an age of progress and revolution, it was also an age of expansionist transgression and capitalist exploitation. This point is aptly made by critical theorists Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). In their canonical work, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), they posit that advancement made during the Enlightenment did not result in a positive Hegelian "*Aufhebung*" [sublation], as Hegelian dialectics suggests, but rather supplanted one coercive system for another.<sup>6</sup> While *Dialektik der Aufklärung* was completed two years after the Second World War and sought to explain the rise of fascism in Germany, its insights are highly relevant for an analysis of the period around 1800. If the modern

---

<sup>6</sup> See Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, 1966.

nation state came into being during this time, as suggested by thinkers such as Gellner, Hobsbawm, and Anderson, then it stands to reason that contemporary nationalism, along with its destructive potential, is also rooted in the Enlightenment. While my analysis highlights German literary works whose ideations of the German nation are compatible with progressive and egalitarian values, it is not my intention to diminish or distract from the decidedly dark path of German nationalism. Rather, I seek to explore whether concepts of the nation are inextricably and necessarily tied to exclusionary modes of thinking. To this end, German nationalism in its infancy offers a fruitful field of study.

Accompanying inquiries of nation, this dissertation will also analyze patriotism as an integral yet different component of national identity and nationalism. Like nationalism, the concept of patriotism is multifaceted, comprised of different ethical and sociopolitical elements allowing for multiple interpretations. Let us consider a simple definition to start. Nationalism, as I have outlined above, can be simply defined as interest in national identity, and the belief that the nation should be congruent with the state. Patriotism can loosely be defined as strong devotion and feeling for one's country or homeland [*Vaterland*]. Nationalism, however, can also encompass these attitudes and feelings. Igor Primoratz offers the following helpful distinction of the terms in his entry on patriotism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

Both patriotism and nationalism involve love of, identification with, and special concern for a certain entity. In the case of patriotism, that entity is one's *patria*, one's country; in the case of nationalism, that entity is one's *natio*, one's nation (in the ethnic/cultural sense of the term). Thus patriotism and nationalism are understood as the same type of set of beliefs and attitudes, and distinguished in terms of their objects [*patria* v *natio*], rather than the strength of those beliefs and attitudes, or as sentiment vs. theory.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Primoratz, Igor, "Patriotism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/patriotism/> (Accessed on 10 July 2025).

While the two terms are ostensibly synonymous, Primoratz's distinction is helpful in delineating the distinct aims of each term, that is identification with and or love for either the *natio* (in the ethnic and cultural sense of the term) or the *patria* (homeland or country). Thus, we could say a patriot is concerned for the wellbeing of those with whom they live in close proximity, i.e., are a part of the homeland, whereas the nationalist is more concerned with the ethnic and cultural composition of those same people. While these distinctions are perhaps more difficult to parse out from one another today, 18<sup>th</sup> century German patriotism falls more in line with Primoratz' description. Hans Peter Herrmann suggests a similar view when he writes in *Machtphantasie Deutschland*, "Der Patriotismus sei eng mit den humanistischen und universellen Zielen der Aufklärung verbunden gewesen; anders als der partikuläre »Nationalismus« habe er vaterländische Ziele und Weltbürgertum zu vereinen gewußt." (Patriotism was closely tied to the humanistic and universal goals of Enlightenment; unlike particularistic "nationalism", patriotism was able to unite patriotic goals and cosmopolitanism) (15). Patriotism in this sense was part of a larger goal of civic duty and engagement for the betterment of the homeland.

Like nationalism, patriotism can be analyzed and evaluated as a spectrum of varied sentiments, embodying exclusionary and xenophobic points of view as well as progressive and egalitarian ones. Indeed, just as contemporary forms of nationalism are heavily critiqued and often seen as a negative force, so too is patriotism. There is no doubt that strong patriotic sentiments can lead to the bolstering of exclusionary forms of nationalism. And the inverse also applies; nationalism can feed into and stoke chauvinistic patriotism. As such, both concepts are vulnerable to the same exclusionary practices.

Patriotism not only accommodates exclusionary politics, it can also facilitate oppression. Leo Tolstoy, who was highly critical of patriotism, argues that it is a mechanism of state control.

Patriotism in its simplest, clearest, and most indubitable signification is nothing else but a means of obtaining for the rulers their ambitions and covetous desires, and for the ruled the abdication of human dignity, reason, and conscience, and a slavish enthrallment to those in power. And as such it is recommended wherever it is preached.<sup>8</sup>

Tolstoy astutely describes issues we continue to grapple with today concerning patriotism and nationalism, and I agree with his assessment that patriotic and nationalistic sentiments are often leveraged as a means of state control: they are used to “manufacture consent” (to borrow from Noam Chomsky) for state-led actions. Thus, they are employed to erode progressive and inclusionary ideals—concern for the well-being and cultivation of the *patria*, that is, those with whom you live in close proximity, not necessarily denoted by political borders—or to merge them with tribalistic attitudes. Primoratz, paraphrasing Tolstoy’s sentiments on the immorality of patriotism continues,

It [patriotism] is stupid because every patriot holds his own country to be the best of all whereas, obviously, only one country can qualify. It is immoral because it enjoins us to promote our country’s interests at the expense of all other countries and by any means, including war, and is thus at odds with the most basic rule of morality, which tells us not to do to others what we would not want them to do to us.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the problem at the core of both nationalism and patriotism can be aptly assessed by this metric. Today patriotic sentiments often fall prey to these exceptionalist attitudes. When considering the transformation these sentiments can undergo, however, it is fruitful to consider the potentiality of egalitarian notions of patriotism predominantly in its early formations during the long eighteenth century.

More progressive and egalitarian forms of patriotism could include what Primoratz assesses as “Moderate Patriotism.”

---

<sup>8</sup> Tolstoy, Leo. “On Patriotism”, 1894. <https://www.panarchy.org/tolstoy/1894.eng.html> (Accessed 12 July 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Primoratz, Igor, "Patriotism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/patriotism/> (Accessed on 10 July 2025).

Moderate patriotism is not exclusive. Its adherent will show special concern for his country and compatriots, but that will not prevent him from showing concern for other countries and their inhabitants. Moreover, this kind of patriotism allows for the possibility that under certain circumstances the concern for human beings in general will override the concern for one's country and compatriots. Such patriotism is compatible with a decent degree of humanitarianism.<sup>10</sup>

It is my contention that the emergent German patriotism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century took on a predominantly egalitarian *modus operandi* in line with Primoratz's notion of moderate patriotism. This is most visible in the numerous patriotic institutions which were established throughout various German speaking territories (and elsewhere throughout Europe) during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although patriotic attitudes shifted into the exclusionary parameters described above, predominantly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is much one can glean from these early egalitarian forms of patriotism.

At their core, many patriotic institutions, as projects of Enlightenment, were created with the goal to educate (enlighten) the body populace in order to cultivate a more progressive society. In his book, *Die patriotischen Gesellschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Hans Hubrig describes the motivations of the Hamburg patriotic society of 1724 as one such endeavor:

Sie wollen Patrioten machen, indem sie mit natürlichen und vernünftigen Gründen ihre Mitbürger belehren und sie teilnehmen lassen an den bewegenden Ideen ihrer Zeit, indem sie ihre Mitmenschen aufklären. Da sie aber gleichzeitig den Gedanken des Weltbürgers in ihre Welt aufnehmen, gehen sie über den Patriotismus der Alten hinaus und vertreten schon im Ansatz jene Art von Patriotismus, der für das ganze Zeitalter der Aufklärung charakteristisch ist. (18)

They want to make patriots by instructing their fellow citizens with natural and reasonable foundations and by letting them participate in the moving ideas of their time by enlightening their fellow human beings. At the same time, however, by incorporating the idea of the cosmopolitan into their world, they go beyond the patriotism of the ancients thus promoting the kind of patriotism that is characteristic of the entire Age of Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this dissertation are mine.

Viewed in this light, 18<sup>th</sup>-century patriotism can be described as the inclination to better the community via an education founded upon humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. The ethnic and cultural composition of the ‘community’ is not necessarily relevant, and although the terms of ‘belonging’ become contested later on, the patriotic idea, in its early formations, remains open and cosmopolitan in scope.

To summarize, there is an intimate link between nationalism and patriotism. The terms are often used interchangeably as they both describe similar sentiments towards the nation or the homeland. Nationalism can loosely be defined as attitudes concerning the nation and national identity—including but not limited to all of the ethnic and cultural components— and patriotism as attitudes concerning civic engagement and the bettering of the homeland. In many cases, there is overlap; a desire to foster and develop the nation could be described as a type of patriotism; likewise a strong devotion and love for the homeland could be interpreted as a form of nationalism. Throughout this dissertation, I examine specific cases that typically focus on either one or the other concept; both ultimately contribute to national ideations.

## Chapter Outline

Chapter one, “Herder’s and Fichte’s Cultural Nation,” focuses on two figures who both advocate for a German linguistic and cultural revival, but differ drastically in their respective overall ideas of a German nation. Johann Gottfried Herder’s idea of the German nation is inspired by his extensive theory of language. For Herder, history, culture, politics, and consequently nation can all be understood via linguistic formations. Otto Dann writes in *Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland*,

Herder verwies als einer der ersten auf die besondere Bedeutung der Sprache, der Literatur und der Geschichte für den Charakter und das Selbstbewußtsein eines Volkes. Er betrachtet die Nation nicht nur von ihren politischen Repräsentanten, sondern auch vom Volke her: als eine Sprach- und Kulturgemeinschaft, die sich aus ihrer Geschichte erschließt. (40)

Herder was one of the first to point out the special significance of language, literature and history for the character and self-awareness of a people. He viewed the nation not only in terms of its political representatives, but also in terms of its people: as a linguistic and cultural community that is revealed through its history.

To this end, Herder approached history via an anthropological lens, which recognizes and values the idiosyncrasies of the cultural and linguistic development of different communities. Critical of the stifling ubiquity of French language and culture, Herder championed a German linguistic and cultural revival and sought to cultivate a uniquely German sense of nation via literature. He believed that a German literary renaissance could unify a nationless Germany.

While Herder's culturally informed sense of nation is aligned with a liberal brand of nationalism, as Mescevic argues, his overall ideation of a German nation extends beyond his vision of a literary/linguistic revival. Herder's emphasis on *Humanität* motivates his condemnations of European colonial and imperial endeavors. *Humanität* in Herder's sense champions egalitarian values, individual freedoms, and happiness for all people, while forcefully condemning abuses of state power. As Hans Adler puts it succinctly in the *Herder Handbook*, "Herder's quantitative concept of *Humanität* is a clear vote for global equality of all human beings, leading him to fierce criticism of slavery, colonialism, racism and Eurocentrism" (104). Herder's investment in an egalitarian idea of the nation sets him apart from near contemporaries who embraced exclusionary concepts. Herder's *liberal nationalism* underlines the intrinsic value of all communities. As Miscevic explains, "[e]ach ethno-national community is valuable in and of itself since it is only within the natural encompassing framework of various cultural traditions that important meanings and values are produced and transmitted. The members of such

communities share a special cultural proximity to each other.”<sup>12</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, while sharing Herder’s views concerning the need to reinvigorate German language and culture, arguably differs from Herder in his overall assessment of nationalism.

Fichte, like Herder, sees great value in the cultivation of German culture and seeks to foster a literary and linguistic revival in Germany. In his (in)famous *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808; *Addresses to the German Nation*), however, Fichte, unlike Herder, defines the German nation/Germanness via ethnic parameters. And importantly, like Kleist and unlike Herder, Fichte formulated the *Reden* in direct response to the French occupation of German-speaking territories. To be sure, Fichte’s ethnically grounded nationalism is alarming. It bears similarities to the aggressive and xenophobic forms of nationalism, which were dominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, particularly throughout both world wars. Some scholars, however, offer a more positive evaluation of Fichte’s *Reden*, noting that some sections conceive of the nation in open and flexible terms. There are moments when Fichte appears open to an inclusive form of liberal nationalism—one grounded not in ethnicity but in a shared political motivation or trajectory. In other words, Fichte’s text is inconsistent at best.

Where Fichte and Herder link ideas of the nation to cultural and linguistic parameters, Schiller and Kleist situate the nation in a nexus of revolution and rebellion. Schiller’s philosophical inquiries tend towards a synthesis of dualities. In particular, Schiller sought to address the rift between Enlightenment rationality and a burgeoning sense of individuality and an interest in emotional expression. Indeed, Schiller’s theory of politics and of human historical development is informed by his reflections on aesthetics. Schiller saw great value in art. In

---

<sup>12</sup> Primoratz, Igor, "Patriotism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/patriotism/> (Accessed on 10 July 2025).

expressing beauty and freedom, he argues, art has the potential to transform societies through an aesthetic revolution, culminating in the creation of a *Menschenrepublik*. Douglas Moggach writes, “Schiller rejects the subordination of beauty under usefulness, one of the maladies of the age: the exclusive focus on utility obscures the presence of disinterested freedom, of which art is the symbol.”<sup>13</sup> Schiller laid out these thoughts in a series of letters, initially addressed to his patron, the Prince of Schleswig-Holstein-Augustenburg, titled *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters, 1795). Schiller wrote these letters in the wake of the French Revolution. Like many, he initially welcomed the new order—the toppling of monarchy in favor of democracy—but soon turned away in disgust, as the revolution devolved into bloodshed. Schiller’s contributions to the ideation of a German nation are rooted in his aesthetic republicanism and powered by a desire to effect a synthesis of rational and sensuous drives, sentiments which he wishes to impart upon the body populace via an aesthetic education. In this light, Schiller is an advocate for a brand of moderate patriotism.

While Schiller’s aesthetically and philosophically inflected patriotism is forged in reaction to the French Revolution, his politics favor a democratic German nation that overcomes the hierarchical structures of governance prevalent in all of Europe and German *Kleinstaaterei* in particular. Schiller advocates for a moderate patriotism as part of the desire to foster an educated German *Volk*. The impetus for many of Schiller’s works in this regard rests in the larger context of the shifting sociopolitical landscape of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In *Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland*, Otto Dann offers helpful contextualization. He writes,

---

<sup>13</sup> Moggach, Douglas. “Schiller’s Aesthetic Republicanism,” *History of Political Thought*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 520–41.

Im Verlaufe des 18. Jahrhunderts wurde Patriotismus jedoch neu konzipiert von Bevölkerungsgruppen, die sich nicht auf alte Privilegien berufen konnten und doch beanspruchten, zur Nation zu gehören: das neue Wirtschaftsbürgertum, die arrivierten Beamten, vor allem aber die Intelligenz. Sie waren zunehmend von den naturrechtlichen Grundanschauungen der Aufklärung geprägt und entwickelten von diesen her ein neues Gesellschaftsmodell, in dem nicht nur die Privilegierten zur Nation gehörten. (28)

In the course of the 18th century, however, patriotism was reconceived by population groups who were not privy to old privileges and yet claimed to belong to the nation: the new economic bourgeoisie, the established civil servants, but above all the intelligentsia. They were increasingly influenced by the Enlightenment's fundamental views of natural law and developed a new model of society based on these, in which not only the privileged belonged to the nation.

To this end, Schiller's literary oeuvre seeks to combat tyranny by educating both the aristocracy and the masses in hopes of creating an enlightened republic.

It is via Schiller's moderate patriotic inclinations that I explore the relationship between his aesthetic philosophies and his grammar of resistance. I argue that *Wilhelm Tell* is an example of what Herder called a "geläuterter Patriotismus" [purified patriotism].<sup>14</sup> In Schiller's reimagining of the Tell saga, the fractured Swiss cantons band together to expel the tyrannical Habsburg occupational forces. Through their communal efforts—the forging of a democratic republic—and Tell's actions, the Swiss people mount a successful revolution and secure their independence. While Schiller's depiction of revolution is unrealistically idealistic—beside the main antagonist, almost no one is killed, as the Swiss revolutionaries abstain from revenge and contain their rage—it highlights his vision of an enlightened republic founded on his holistic

---

<sup>14</sup> From Herder's "Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität" (1796), "Der Patriotismus muß sich nothwendig immer mehr von Schlacken reinigen und läutern. Jede Nation muß es fühlen lernen, daß sie nicht im Auge Andrer, nicht im Munde der Nachwelt, sondern nur in sich, in sich selbst groß, schön, edel, reich, wohlgeordnet, thätig und glücklich werde, und daß sodann die fremde wie die späte Achtung ihr wie der Schatte dem Körper folge" (Patriotism must necessarily cleanse and purify itself more and more from dross. Every nation must learn to feel that it will not become great, beautiful, noble, rich, well-ordered, active and happy in the eyes of others, not in the mouths of posterity, but only in itself and that then the foreign as well as the late respect will follow it like the shadow the body.) <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/herder/humanita/chap011.html> (Accessed 3 May 2025).

aesthetics. Both Schiller's aesthetic philosophy and his historical dramas contribute to an ideation of the German nation imagined as an enlightened community, a *Menschenrepublik*.

Following Schiller's idealistic vision of the nation, I turn to Kleist, who, like Schiller, locates his nation in a grammar of resistance. Kleist's rebellion, however, takes on a more violent and even nihilistic tone than Schiller's aesthetic revolution. Similar to Schiller, Kleist draws on a historical precedent in his program of national ideation. Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* remythologizes the Arminius saga, likening German resistance against Napoleon's occupation in 1806 to the Germanic resistance against the Romans in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Arminius saga found great resonance in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as Germans longed for a sense of nationhood amidst French occupation. Julia Hell notes in *The Conquest of Ruins*,

With his usual excess, Kleist celebrated Germania's barbarians, ending with Arminius's appeal to his tribal followers to march on Rome. Set at the time of Augustus, the play moves toward a climactic battle between the leader of a Germanic tribe, Arminius the Cheruscan, and the Roman troops of Varus. It was apparent to Kleist's audiences that Augustus (and his stand-in Varus) was Napoleon. (246)

But as Hell points out, Kleist's works are full of "excess": excess of violence, contradiction, paradox. Excess is a hallmark of Kleist's writings. Violent resistance, in particular, is a prominent motif in his patriotic writings from the occupation period. As Hell explains, "Kleist urged 'Germania's children' to 'color all public squares...white with their [the French] bones' and 'to build a dam in the Rhine with their corpses'" (246). It would appear then that Kleist can rightly be characterized as a chauvinistic nationalist. Indeed, 20<sup>th</sup>-century reception of Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* suggests as much: *Die Hermannsschlacht* and other patriotic writings were viewed favorably by the German National Socialists. And yet, there is also much compelling evidence that Kleist critiques and subverts the same rabid nationalist discourse that he himself promotes. While there is little doubt that Kleist detested the French occupiers, his works also

evinced a great deal of irony and doubt. Thus, I argue that Kleist's works—and his ideations of the German nation—promote excessive violence even as they point to the inherently destructive and morally problematic nature of chauvinistic nationalism.

In chapter 3, “Kleist's Subversive Patriotism: Anti-Napoleonic Rage and the German Nation,” I examine *Die Hermannsschlacht* and a number of Kleist's politically charged works intended for the publication *Germania* (1809), including his poem “Germania an ihre Kinder” and “Katechismus der Deutschen.” My analysis details a nuanced view of Kleist's patriotic and nationalistic sentiments. Unlike Fichte's, Kleist's concept of the nation does not rely on ethnic parameters; rather, Kleist defines the German nation through resistance, sovereignty, and emancipation. Miscevic bears quoting again,

Oppression and injustice give the victimized group a just cause and the right to secede. If a minority group is oppressed by the majority to the extent that almost every minority member is worse off than most members of the majority simply in virtue of belonging to the minority, then nationalist claims on behalf of the minority are morally plausible and potentially compelling. The argument establishes a typical remedial right, acceptable from a liberal standpoint.<sup>15</sup>

However, as Kleist demonstrates throughout his works, even nationalist endeavors inspired by righteous causes can be co-opted and corrupted—a warning he imparts in *Die Hermannsschlacht*. In his remythologized version of the *Varusschlacht*, Kleist paints a bleak picture of the Germanic resistance against the Roman invaders. Kleist's ostensible hero, Hermann, is willing to sacrifice everything and everyone to achieve his political and military goals—including manipulating his wife, facilitating and framing Roman delegates for sexual assault, and executing prisoners of war. Furthermore, Hermann's transgressions do not stop in defense of Germanic territory, as the ending of the drama indicates; he embarks on a drawn-out

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism/#ArguFavoNatiClasVsLibeDeepNeedForComm> (Accessed on 11 May 2025).

campaign of pushing the Romans all the way back to Rome, ending with a vision of a black flag fluttering over rubble. Kleist does not depict a hero worthy of emulation; his Hermann is no Tell. Given the rather inconsistent and paradoxical nature of Kleist's literary oeuvre, I am inclined to argue that *Die Hermannsschlacht* reflects a realistic, if nihilistic, vision of rebellion. Keenly aware of the fallibility of man, Kleist is simultaneously advocating for resistance and German liberation and warning of the path that such a course of action could lead down.

## Chapter 1: Idealistic Conceptions of the Nation in the Works of Herder

I begin my inquiry into German literary and philosophical representations of nationalism and patriotism with an author who held a view of society and of the nation, which, I argue, accentuated the possibility of a humanistic brand of liberal nationalism. Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744-1803) philosophies concerning language, culture, and the nation remain relevant to this day. There has been a resurgence of scholarship on Herder in the last two decades. Much of this scholarship seeks to refute claims, predominantly made in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, that Herder espoused exclusionary and harmful theories of the nation that align more with our understanding of classical nationalism. Indeed, Herder has been accused of promoting xenophobia, but he has also been credited with working against chauvinism towards a recognition and appreciation of other cultures. In the following, I demonstrate how Herder's theories contributed to what I refer to as an idealistic vision of the nation. By this, I mean that his concept of the nation was primarily undergirded by a sense of *Humanität* (humanity), by an emphasis on individual freedom and happiness, and by a forceful condemnation of abuses of state power.

An enormous shift in philosophy, history, and politics set in motion by the Enlightenment unfolded during Herder's lifetime. The growing popularity of empiricist forms of cognition, combined with economic unrest set in motion by new industrial modes of production, ushered in an age that sought to challenge the status quo. Religious orthodoxy and conformity to dogma were no longer the defining anchors of life. Indeed, the Age of Enlightenment was one of revolution, politically and intellectually. It was marked by technological innovations that allowed for the industrialization of manufacturing and by a discursive shift away from codified religious

adherence to a self-aware sense of individualism; shifts which drastically changed the social, economic, and political landscape.

Many prominent scholars who have written on modern nationalism, such as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson, attribute the emergence of modern nationalism to the advent of industrialization and the declining status of religion. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*,

in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. (11)

Although other scholars, such as Todd Kontje and Caspar Hirschi, have pointed out that some concepts of nationalism developed well before the Industrial Revolution, Anderson's discussion of the waning importance of traditional forms of legitimacy and of new forms of collective identity in the wake of economic innovations informs my analysis of Herder's concept of a cultural nation.

Herder's concept of the cultural nation predates the formation of what is typically understood as classical nationalism. I argue that Herder's take on the nation is not aligned with the common implications of the modern nation-state, which often emphasizes the maintenance of state-held institutions of power.<sup>16</sup> Herder vehemently objects to bigotry and to all forms of state-sanctioned violence and oppression. He was skeptical of authoritarian forms of government, as

---

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Gellner breaks down his definition of nationalism in defining the terms *state* and *nation*. Concerning the former he writes, "Discussion of the state may begin with Max Weber's celebrated definition of it, as that agency within society which possess the monopoly of legitimate violence" (3).

embodied by absolutist rulers, and envisioned patriotism and the nation on purely linguistic and cultural terms. This reflects notions of liberal nationalism that were discussed in the introduction. Herder, in particular, advocates for the flourishing of diversity. On the topic of classical vs. liberal forms of nationalism, Miscevic writes, “Each national culture contributes uniquely to the diversity of human cultures. The most famous twentieth century proponent of the idea, Isaiah Berlin (interpreting Herder), writes: The ‘physiognomies’ of cultures are unique: each presents a wonderful exfoliation of human potentialities in its own time and place and environment.”<sup>17</sup> As such Herder saw potential for a “wonderful exfoliation” of a German nation whilst also advocating the same for other nations. This notion is often in conflict with contemporary forms of classical nationalism that more commonly express a chauvinistic particularism.

As Isaiah Berlin points out in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, Herder differentiated patriotism and nationalism: “Patriotism was one thing, nationalism another: an innocent attachment to family, language, one’s own city, one’s own country, its traditions, is not to be condemned. But he [Herder] goes on to say that aggressive nationalism is detestable in all its manifestations, and wars are mere crimes” (224). To this day, detangling love for one’s country from violent forms of nationalism predicated upon differential preference remains problematic. The aim of this chapter is thus to examine an array of key theories espoused by Herder that situate his concept of the nation along more liberal and egalitarian lines. To accentuate these views, I will first delve further into his notion of *Humanität*; I will then analyze theories proposed in his earlier works on language, and finally progress to his later works involving

---

<sup>17</sup> Miscevic, Nenad, "Nationalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/nationalism/>> (Accessed on 11 May 2025).

theories on the course of history, humanity, and politics. This approach will highlight how Herder's initial theories regarding language influenced his later theories of the nation and statecraft.

*Humanität*, as Herder defines it, is linked to a growing appreciation of emotion and imagination that sought to curb the flow of the rigid, purely rational, mental models promoted by the Enlightenment. Herder is, after all, credited as a forefather of Germany's *Sturm und Drang*. Like many others of his time, he saw a need to infuse tolerance, compassion, and feeling into the academic and literary pursuits of the time. To better understand Herder's concept of *Humanität*, however, we must delve into his religious upbringing as it influenced his worldview and philosophy.

Herder grew up in the town of Mohrunen in East Prussia. He was the son of Gottfried Herder (1706-1763) and Anna Elisabeth Herder (Peltz) (1717-1772), both pious Lutherans of moderate economic means. As Steven D. Martinson notes in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, his father was strict and had a serious disposition, but his mother's sensitive and tender nature helped mellow his father's temper (15). Herder's early exposure to a religious lifestyle was formative. In contrast to his pious upbringing and the adherence to conservative forms of Christianity at the time, however, Herder embraced what we would today likely consider as a progressive brand of religion, one that allowed for more flexible and varied interpretations of and adherence to scripture. Christianity, in a Herderian sense, provides moral guidelines whilst disavowing strict and literal adherence to dogma. Herder saw in Christianity the potential to espouse those egalitarian notions upon which he founded his sense of morality. Religion, deeply entrenched in tradition and aligned with natural stages of societal development was an apt vessel to disseminate such teachings. "Religion ist also, auch schon als

Verstandesübung betrachtet, die höchste Humanität, die erhabenste Blüte der menschlichen Seele“ (*Ideen*, 162; Religion is therefore, even considered as intellectual exercise, the highest humanity, the most sublime flower of the human soul). Herder spoke out against the abuses of religion, which he laments in his condemnations of European colonialism, but continued to see in Christianity a source of empathy and understanding and a powerful force of righteousness. He remains critical of Christianity and the crimes committed in its name, particularly in European colonialist endeavors. In the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (1796) Herder writes,

Selbst das *Christentum*, sobald es als Staatsmaschine auf fremde Völker wirkte, drückte sie schrecklich; bei einigen verstümmelte es dergestalt ihren eigentümlichen Charakter, daß keine anderthalbtausend Jahre ihn haben zurecht bringen mögen. [...] Und was nützen die *Kreuzzüge* dem Orient? Welches Glück haben sie den Küsten der Ostsee gebracht? (671-672)

Even *Christianity*, as soon as it had an effect on foreign peoples in the form of a state machine, oppressed them terribly; in the case of several it so mutilated their own distinctive character that not even one and a half millennia have been able to set it right. [...] And what good did the *crusades* do for the Orient? What happiness have they brought to the coasts of the Baltic Sea? (Forster, 381)

The full force of Herder's condemnation of such abuses is an essential component of his worldview and will be further parsed later in this chapter. And yet, whilst condemning the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity, Herder still believed that religion's core tenets could serve as a source of *Humanität*. Beyond Herder's religiously informed sense of humanity, he was, however, very much an acolyte of Enlightenment thought.

For Herder, the world could be made sense of through empirical sensory experience, a notion that would set him apart from his Idealist contemporaries. He believed that humans are a part of nature and thus do not exist outside of but within and as integral elements of the divine realm of God. As Martinson explains, "Since God is the *Vorbild*, nature cannot be the independent, wholly autonomous entity it might appear to be. Herder's *Weltbild* registers the

eternally active, always dynamic forces of nature, which are essentially divine. While the human being is an embodiment of organic processes that correspond to natural laws, given the nature of the universe, the individual is, in part, also divine (*göttlich*)” (Martinson 34). In this, Herder’s religious thought resembles a Spinozist pantheist worldview but stands in contrast to Kantian philosophy, which maintains that humans are incapable of ever truly knowing the truth about the universe.

Humanity and human agency are at the core of Herder’s philosophical and religious thinking. This is a continuous thread throughout Herder’s works. The betterment of humankind proceeds as an ongoing endeavor of trial and error, a process of empirical learning. Humanity is therefore capable of gaining insights into the universe via experience as an organic process. “All of Herder’s endeavors can be grasped as the attempt to understand the world within the realm of what is accessible to human beings” (Martinson 8). Hans Alder describes Herder’s epistemological position as “theological-empiricist,” which is in line with the brand of liberal, progressive Christianity he espoused (102). Herder was ahead of his time in this regard. His theological beliefs shaped the fundamental egalitarian concepts of his philosophy, including his idea of *Humanität*.

The word *Humanität* originates in the 17<sup>th</sup> century showing “demonstratively its Latin origin (related to *homo, humanus, humanitas*)” (Martinson 94). Its 17<sup>th</sup>-century usage closely resembles the contemporary meaning of the word “humanity,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

I. Connected with *human*. 1. The quality or condition of being human, manhood; the human faculties or attributes collectively; human nature; man in the abstract. [...] 2. The human race; mankind; human beings collectively. [...] II. Connected with *humane*. 3. The character of being humane...

Herder found this usage of the term insufficient and sought to repurpose its meaning to fit his worldview. Herder addresses the concept of *Humanität* predominantly in the *Humanitätsbriefe*:

*Menschen* sind wir allesammt, und tragen insofern die *Menschheit* an uns, oder wir gehören zur *Menschheit*. Leider aber hat man in unserer Sprache dem Wort *Mensch* und noch mehr dem barmherzigen Wort *Menschlichkeit* so oft eine Nebenbedeutung von Niedrigkeit, Schwäche und falschem Mitleid angehängt, daß man jenes nur mit einem Blick der Verachtung, dies mit einem Achselzucken zu begleiten gewohnt ist. [...] So auch *Menschenwürde* und *Menschenliebe*. Das Menschengeschlecht, wie es jetzt ist und wahrscheinlich lange noch seyn wird, hat seinem größtesten Theile nach keine Würde; man darf es eher bemitleiden, als verehren. [...] Alle diese Worte enthalten Theilbegriffe unseres Zwecks, den wir gern mit Einem Ausdruck bezeichnen möchten. Also wollen wir bei dem Wort *Humanität* bleiben. (Hum, SWS 17:137)

[We are all of us *human*, and thus carry with us *humanity*, or we belong to *humanity*. Unfortunately, however, so often in our language are connotations, such as ignobility, weakness, and false sympathy, attached to the word *human* and even more so to the merciful word *humaneness*, that one is accustomed to accompanying the former with a look of disdain and the latter with a shrug of the shoulders. [...] So it is also with *human dignity* and *human kindness/philanthropy*. *Humankind*, as it is now, and likely will be for a long time, has in its largest part no dignity; one would rather pity than venerate it. [...] All of these words embody partial concepts of our purpose, which we would like to designate with a single expression. So let us stay with the word *Humanität*]

Here, Herder develops and differentiates the concept of *Humanität* from other like terms, such as *Menschlichkeit* (“mankind”) and positions it as a state of being, an ideal towards which *Menschheit* is striving. Robert Clark explains in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*,

“Mankind” is the aggregate of all human individuals, past, present, and future, considered as real, tangible, and physical. “Humanity” (Latin *humanitas*, French *humanité*) is an abstract term referring to the ideal state capable of attainment by mankind; secondarily it is the latent potentiality that mankind has for the attainment of that ideal. Hence “humanity” is both an ideal condition and a definable real quality. (94)

*Humanität* is thus a tangible throughline throughout Herder’s thought, from his theories on language to his later theories concerning the state and politics. *Humanität* also informs Herder’s notions of nationalism and justifies casting them in a positive light. Although Herder held a critical view of humanity, he saw the potential for good in every society at every juncture

throughout history. As Hans Adler states, “Herder’s concept of *Humanität* is an open concept. It is the fundamental concept of his lifelong endeavor to constitute a philosophical anthropology that is grounded in the experience of reality and would help to form humanity, that is, all human beings on earth” (113). Herder’s “philosophical anthropology” starts first and foremost from his theories concerning language.

Herder was keenly invested in linguistic theories; they form the starting point from which to analyze his conceptions of nationalism. Indeed, for Herder, language is *the* primary cognitive basis that makes abstractions of a unified nation possible. It should be noted that Herder used the term “nation” as early as 1772 in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache (Treatise on the Origin of Language)*. Here, however, nation refers not to the nation-state as we know it today, but rather designates a group of people who share linguistic and cultural traditions. Germany would not become a nation-state until nearly a century later in 1871. And yet, while the nation-state as a political entity was a later creation, the discourse about nation originates in the period around 1800, as Schulze points out: “terms such as ‘Fatherland’, ‘Volk’, and ‘Nation’ became political key-words [predominately] under the impact of the Napoleonic occupation” (Schulze, 50).

Prior to Napoleon’s European conquest, the political and social upheaval of the French and American Revolutions preoccupied Germany’s literary and intellectual milieu. When the French Revolution devolved into the Reign of Terror, the ensuing violence alienated many German intellectuals who had initially been sympathetic to the goals of *égalité*, *fraternité*, and *liberté*. As we will discover later on, Herder, a keen observer of contemporary culture, offers an assessment of the fallout of the French Revolution in his *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität (Letters for the Advancement of Humanity)* (1793). The *Letters* discuss current affairs and

suggest remedies for what Herder considers the maladies of the time—the failure of humankind to cohabitate in peace. They express a weariness of conflict and condemn abuses of power. Again, a condemnation of abuses of state power is a key component in Herder’s vision of the “nation.”

Considering this growing alienation from the French Revolution, it is necessary to examine how Herder’s thinking evolved throughout the course of his experiences with revolution, war, and abuses of power. While Herder offers more egalitarian imaginings of the nation, he has been singled out as the first German nationalist, although this characterization remains controversial. In his book, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, R.R. Ergang contends that Herder was “indubitably one of the first, if not the first of the writers of modern Europe to develop a comprehensive philosophy of nationalism” (248). While Herder can certainly be counted among the first German writers to reflect on concepts of the nation, the extent to which we can label him a nationalist by today’s metric is debatable. Scholars of Herder’s nationalism are split into two camps: those who argue that Herder was a political nationalist, i.e., a thinker who espoused a politically motivated brand of nationalism in line with definitions put forth by scholars, such as Gellner. In this line of thought, “the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner, 1).<sup>18</sup> The second camp sees Herder as a cultural nationalist who did not advocate the creation of nation-states as political entities (Eggel, Dominic, et al. 51). The latter argument views Herder’s theories on nationalism primarily through a linguistic/literary and aesthetic lens. In my investigation of the matter, I am compelled

---

<sup>18</sup> In *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner alludes to the difficulty of defining “nation.” “Nations maketh man; nations are the artifacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation, and not the other shared attributes, whatever they might be, which separate that category from non-members (7).

to throw my hat into the latter ring, along with many other Herder scholars who view Herder in a positive light. In the following, I argue that Herder's concept of nationalism is cultural and pluralist, and thus at odds with the contemporary usage of the term. Similarly, Herder's theory of language resonates with a pluralistic and humanistic worldview, and his concept of nationalism relies on his literary/linguistic and historical thinking, particularly his concepts of *Bildung* and *Humanität*. Such an examination must begin with his foundational theories on language and culture.

### Language and Nation in Herder's Philosophy

As a thinker, Herder is perhaps best known for his contributions to linguistics and the philosophy of history. Indeed, he has been called the founder of modern linguistics, and a discussion focusing on Herder's linguistic theories is relevant to his theory of the nation. For Herder, history, culture, and politics can all be understood via linguistic formations. A detailed exposé of some of Herder's most important linguistic theories will therefore help us parse how his theories on the nation are informed by egalitarian constructs.

As mentioned previously, Herder used the term "nation" as early as 1772. This early usage aligns with the parameters set out in the introduction: nation, deriving from the Latin *natio* or "tongue", refers to a group of people who are defined by linguistic proximity (Hirschi, 12). It also evokes a narrowly circumscribed concept of the nation constructed as early as the Middle Ages, as Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh explains in his essay "Herder and the Idea of a

Nation”: “Before Herder’s perspective, the concept ‘nation’ had a more limited meaning. Latin ‘nationes,’ for example, designated groups of university students.”<sup>19</sup>

For Herder, language plays an essential role in the education [*Bildung*] of the individual and consequently the flourishing of culture and humanity, *Humanität*. Culture and *Humanität*, in turn, are essential components of a flourishing nation. Indeed, language for Herder is fundamental to cognition and being: it allows individuals to understand their surrounding environment. Through language, we discover and interact with the world, and we learn how to express ourselves in our given environment. The notion that language is the foundation of all cognitive interaction is a core concept in modern linguistics. As Michael Forster points out in his entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Herder can claim to have virtually established whole *disciplines* that we now take for granted. For example, it was mainly Herder (not, as has often been claimed, Hamann) who established fundamental ideas concerning an intimate dependence of thought on language that underpin modern philosophy of language.”

Herder’s work on linguistics dates back to the 1760s. In *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (1767-8; *Fragments on Recent German Literature*), Herder readily compares Germany’s and Europe’s historical condition—he diagnoses the overbearing importance of philosophy as a result of Enlightenment thought, which, he argues, leads to a lack of emotion and empathy—with that of other countries via an analysis of literature and language. Language, as a vehicle of cognition, offers a metric in which to measure cultural evolution. For Herder, language and culture are highly susceptible to the shaping influence of geographical region and climate. Herder also elaborates on the importance of one’s natural environment in his theories on history, as I explain below.

---

<sup>19</sup> Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, “Human Figurations: Long-term Perspectives on the Human Condition,” vol. 7, Issue 1, May 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0007.103>, accessed on October 10, 2022

According to Herder, a language is influenced by the environment and historic period in which it is used. Thus, when comparing German with ancient languages, such as ancient Hebrew or Arabic, Herder attributes differences between the two to historically specific cultural and economic conditions. As Herder states in the *Fragmente*:

Ihre [Sprache] ist reich an Vieh: Naturnamen sind in ihr häufig: im kleinen Buch der Hebräer, das wir allein noch übrig haben, sind schon 250 Botanische Wörter: Namen, die unsre Sprache zwar kann ausdrücken, aber nicht auszudrücken weiß. (53)

Their language is rich in livestock. In it names of natural things are frequent. In the small book of the Hebrews, which is all that we still have remaining, there are already 250 botanical words, names which our language can but does not know how to express (Forster 33).

The plethora of botanical words that Herder considers characteristic of ancient Hebrew is indicative of interactions between language and region. The contemporary fascination with the rich vocabulary relating to “snow” in several indigenous Alaskan vernaculars implies the same concept of language. It stands to reason that a group of people who live in a snow-laden region need more words to express the idiosyncrasies of such an environment. Conversely, the languages of populations who live in more arid climates would likely be characterized by an absence of such descriptors in favor of others that better suit their particular needs.

As this example shows, Herder considered language a natural, organic structure that evolved in tandem with the “nation” that speaks it. In order to fully understand and appreciate any given culture, one must understand its language. For Herder, it follows that literature, like language, provides a metric by which to assess cultural progress. He writes in *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, “Ihr könnt also die Literatur eines Volks ohne ihre Sprache nicht übersehen, ihr könnt jene durch diese kennenlernen, ihr könnt beide durch einander ausbessern, denn ihre Vollkommenheit geht mit ziemlich gleichen Schritten fort“ (178; So you cannot survey the literature of a people without their language, you can get to know them through this, you can

improve both through each other, for their perfection progresses with pretty much the same steps). Herder elaborates on these core ideas in *Fragmente* with particular emphasis on the status of German literature and the influence of foreign languages and literatures.

Herder's *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* offers an appraisal of the German literary status quo. It is apparent that Herder was grappling with the direction in which German language and culture were headed. In particular, he was concerned that the German language was at an impasse, stuck between its youthful, sensual origins and the cold, calculating political and scientific impetus of the Enlightenment. Herder offers two conceptualizations of language: language as a functional tool, used for pragmatic purposes; and language as an evolving organism that possesses artistic potential and is capable of articulating the full range of human emotion and experience. He asks in the *Fragmente* "Wo steht unsre Deutsche Sprache?"

In allen Staaten ist zu unsrer Zeit die Prose die Sprache der Schriftsteller, und die Poesie eine Kunst, die die Natur der Sprache verschönert, um zu gefallen. Gegen die Alten und gegen die wilden Sprachen zu rechnen, sind die Mundarten Europens [sic] mehr für die Ueberlegung, als für die Sinne und die Einbildungskraft. [...]

Die Prose ist uns die einzig natürliche Sprache, und das seit undenklichen Zeiten gewesen—nun sollen wir diese Sprache ausbilden? Wie kann das seyn? Entweder zur mehr dichterischen Sprache, damit der Stil vielseitig, schön und lebhafter werde; oder zur mehr Philosophischen Sprache, damit er einseitig, richtig und deutlich werde; oder wenn es möglich ist, zu allen beiden. (38)

In all states of our time prose is the language of the writer and poetry an art that beautifies the nature of language in order to please. Compared to the old and savage forms of speech, the vernaculars of Europe are more suited for contemplation, rather than for the senses and imagination. [...] Prose is for us the only natural language, and has been so since time immemorial—should we develop this language now? How can that be? Either towards a more poetic language, so that the style will become versatile, beautiful, and lively; or towards a more philosophical language, so that it becomes one-sided, correct, and precise; or if it is possible, towards both.

The thoughts expressed in these passages respond to Enlightenment's cold rationalism, which, as Herder believes, had permeated the German literary and linguistic sphere. Herder was certainly not the only one who diagnosed growing alienation and deindividuation. He argued further that

contemporary attempts to rejuvenate German literature by merely imitating the great works of antiquity offered no solution to the task at hand. For many of Herder's contemporaries, the works of the ancient Greeks epitomized culture *par excellence*. Herder too lauded the works of antiquity, but he was aware that mere imitation would hinder the development of a unique German literary voice. Every language offers new ways of understanding and seeing the world. This unique contribution, however, is lost if writers respond only to the literatures of other regions and fail to interact with their own unique environments.

Herder is particularly critical of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803), a German poet, who, like many of his contemporaries, broke with the rationalist traditions of the Enlightenment and reinvigorated German poetry. Klopstock is referenced in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) famous epistolary novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and played an influential role in the counter-enlightenment literary formation known as "Sturm und Drang" (storm and stress). Herder acknowledges Klopstock's contribution to the German literary oeuvre while also pointing out the limitations of the contemporary German writer:

Leset den Homer, und denn leset Klopstock; jener malet, indem er spricht; er malet lebende Natur und Politische Welt: dieser spricht um zu malen, er schildert; und um neu zu seyn: eine ganz andre Welt; die Welt der Seele und der Gedanken, da jener sie hingegen in Körper kleidet und spricht: Laß sie selbst reden! (55)

Read Homer and then read Klopstock. Homer paints when he speaks; he paints living nature and the political world; Klopstock speaks in order to paint, he depicts—and in order to be new—a quite different world, the world of the soul and of thoughts, whereas Homer by contrast clothes these in bodies and says 'Let them speak for themselves!' (Forster 34)

Herder highlights these issues of translation and imitation in prose. To Herder, it is not sufficient to merely imitate the style of great works. Rather, one must foster a uniquely German literary community, a cultural nation. His critique of Klopstock demonstrates how an author who is praised for his odes and faithful translations of the classics nonetheless encounters problems, for

example, in transcribing Greek hexameters into German prose. Herder notes that the song-like quality of ancient Greek hexameters cannot be fully rendered in German. Any attempt to transpose the linguistic idiosyncrasies of one cultural context into another is doomed to fail.

Herder states in the *Fragmente*:

Ihr wollt Deutsche Hexameter machen; machet sie so gut ihr könnet, und alsdenn lasset dem ohngeachtet die Versart drüber drücken, wie man es Klopstock rieth, oder bittet, wie Kleist, dies Sylbenmaas als Prose zu lesen. Könnet ihr Hexameter deklamiren? Wohl! so werdet ihr auch wissen, daß das die beste Deklamation ist, die seine Füße am meisten verbirgt, und nur alsdenn hören läßt, wenn sie die Materie unterstützen. Sehet! So wenig ist der Hexameter und die Polymetrischen Sylbenmaaße unsrer Sprache natürlich: bei den Griechen foderte ihn die singende Deklamation das an den Gesang gewöhnte Ohr, die vieltrittige Sprache; bei uns verbeut ihn, Sprache und Ohr und Deklamation.<sup>20</sup>

You want to make German hexameters? Make them as well as you can, and then nevertheless have the verse form forced/pressed onto them, as *Klopstock* was advised to do, or request, like *Kleist*, that this meter be read as prose. Can you recite hexameters? Good! Then you will also know that the best recitation is the one that most hides its feet and only lets them be heard when they support the substance. See! The hexameter and the polymetric meters are so little natural to our language; with the Greeks their *singing* recitation, their ear *used to song*, and their *variously paced* language demanded it, but with us language and ear and recitation forbid it. (Forster)

While applauding the efforts of German authors to synthesize Greek idiosyncrasies into the German language, Herder ultimately diagnoses an incompatibility between the two languages that does not allow for a one-to-one carry-over. Indeed, Herder's understanding of the connection between linguistic cognitive processes and culture is truly remarkable for the time. Language, as an organic and ever-evolving entity, will ultimately overlap with other languages and cultures. This is not something Herder sees as problematic. Rather, as his appraisal and appreciation of foreign literature has demonstrated, he believes that it contributes to a greater good: an enrichment of one's own language and cultural flourishing. This is perhaps most visible

---

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/herder\\_litteratur01\\_1767?p=72](https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/herder_litteratur01_1767?p=72) (68-69) (Accessed on 22 April 2025)

in Herder's appraisal of old languages (Greek and Latin) and his analysis of the effects of foreign European languages (namely French) on German.

It is well known that Herder's preoccupation with linguistics and the state of German literature in *Fragmente* was motivated by his study of Greek antiquity and French culture. As a keen observer of history and culture, Herder believed that the German language was being stifled by the ubiquity of spoken French, a sentiment by many Germans. French was the language of the German aristocracy and of life at court. All matters of political and philosophical import were discussed in French, while German was regarded as an inferior language, spoken only by the peasantry. Herder's attempts at a literary rejuvenation were motivated, at least in part, by the gap in knowledge and literacy between the upper and lower classes. Herder's push for a new appraisal of language and literature was ideologically aimed at the *Volk*, the common people, in an attempt to foster a sense of national unity founded in language.

The German elites were convinced of the cultural inferiority of the German language. The Prussian King Friedrich, for example, despised German culture. Schulze notes in *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck 1763-1867*, that "His world, the world of the intellect, of culture and good taste, was a French world; for him, things German meant his father's deeply detested court, that dull, unintellectual, bigoted and uneducated milieu, reeking with beer and tobacco fumes" (44-45). During the Napoleonic conquest of Germany, French was the language of the occupation forces and, as such, fueled nationalistic anti-French sentiments. For Herder, however, the need to develop one's own language was not tied to an aggressive German nationalism based on ethnic parameters—such a case will be examined regarding Fichte (1762-1814), who espoused chauvinist rhetoric. Rather, Herder sought to promote the development of the unique properties of the German language and

culture, which had not been allowed to flourish under French cultural hegemony. Although Herder pushed back against French cultural and linguistic dominance, he nonetheless advocated for the unfettered development of not only German but all national cultures and remained vehemently opposed to all forms of political or cultural oppression. This is perhaps most evident in his later writings concerning European transgressions. In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) he writes,

Je mehr wir Europäer Mittel und Werkzeuge erfinden, euch andern Welttheile zu unterjochen, zu betrügen und zu plündern—vielleicht ists einst eben an euch zu triumphiren! Wir schlagen Ketten an, womit ihr uns ziehen werdet: die umgekehrte Pyramiden unsrer Verfaßungen, werden auf eurem Boden aufrecht kommen, ihr mit uns—gnug, sichtbarlich geht alles ins Grosse! Wir umfaßen, womit es sey, den Kreis der Erde, und was darauf folgt, kann wahrscheinlich nie mehr seine Grundlage schmälern! Wir nahen uns einem neuen Auftritte, wenn auch freilich blos durch Verwesung! (579)

The more we Europeans invent means and tools to subjugate, to deceive, and to plunder you other parts of the world ... Perhaps it will one day be precisely your turn to triumph! We affix chains with which you will pull us; the inverted pyramids of our constitution will turn upright on your ground; with us you will... Enough, it is evident that everything is tending to a larger whole! We embrace the circle of the earth—whatever we may do this with—and what comes next can probably never any longer narrow this circle's foundation! We are approaching a new act [of the play], even if admittedly only through decay! (Forster 352)

Herder is quite astute in this prediction of imperial blowback, as indeed, this is a stark reality that many modern Western states have contended with. As a thinker who championed pluralism and advocated for the freedom of all cultural communities, Herder saw great value in learning other languages and in gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures. He believed that culture, much like language, is not static; cultures and languages continue to evolve and, in doing so, come to integrate aspects of other cultures and languages. As Sonia Sikka points out in her book *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*, “far from holding the view that cultures should shun foreign influence, Herder largely sees cultural interaction as a good thing, as long as it is not the result either of violence or imitation arising purely from a sense of cultural inferiority”

(7). Herder does not see foreign influence as a threat—as long as it does not seek to extinguish the culture or language of another.

These aspects of Herder’s theory of language show that his concept of the nation is not xenophobic in nature. Herder supported every culture’s right to develop its own literature and language while also seeking to rejuvenate German literature and culture. As Alan Patten points out in his article “‘The Most Natural State’: Herder and Nationalism,” “Herder found his fellow Germans to be too enthralled with the French language and culture and claimed that they needed to foster their own cultural and linguistic development. In 1788, he circulated a plan for ‘the first patriotic institute to foster a common spirit in Germany’ in which he called for the establishment of a German academy that would be charged with caring for the German language, studying history of Germany, and encouraging national development” (686). Patten suggests that Herder’s nationalism is predominantly a cultural one: “Herder was concerned to promote the ‘cultural nation,’ not the ‘political nation.’ Rather than aim for political unity or the sovereignty of the German people, he sought to energize the spiritual, linguistic, and aesthetic formation of the German nation” (658). Herder believed that a plurality of linguistic and cultural influences benefits one’s own culture. And although he remained critical of the German tendency to imitate [*nachahmen*], Herder understood that one could, for example, learn a great deal from the study of ancient languages. He writes in the *Fragmente*,

Alle alte Sprachen haben, so wie die alten Nationen, und ihre Werke überhaupt mehr charakteristisches, als das, was neuer ist. Von ihnen muß also unsre Sprache mehr lernen können, als von denen, mit welchen sie mehr verwandt ist; oder der Unterschied zwischen beiden liefert wenigstens den Sprachphilosophen eine Menge Stoff zu Betrachtungen. (65)

Von diesen Schriftstellern [Greek] kann die Deutsche Sprache unstreitig viel lernen; weil sie sich in die Griechische eher und biegsamer schicken kann, als in die Lateinische; weil die Griechische es auch unstreitig mehr verdient, und weil für die Deutschen eine

ausgebildete Poesie und Prose des guten Verstandes, ohnstreitig die beste Sprache ist. (74-74)

All ancient languages have, like the ancient nations and their works in general, more that is distinctive than what is newer. Hence, our language can inevitably learn more from them than from those languages with which it is more closely related; or at least the difference between the two sides supplies philosophers of language with a mass of data for observations.

From these authors the German language can unquestionably learn much, because it can adapt itself more readily and more flexibly to the Greek language than to Latin, because the Greek language also unquestionably deserves it more, and because for the Germans a developed *poetry* and *prose* of the good understanding is unquestionably the best language. (Forster)

The desire to foster literary *Bildung* is apparent in Herder's theories of language. Endeavors to revive elements of classical literature and art were crucial to the aesthetic project in Weimar. Herder believed that, if the Germans could integrate and properly translate the classics, they would be well on their way to a linguistic and cultural renaissance. This is again not a question of mere imitation [nachahmen] but emulation [nacheifern].

Beyond recognizing value in ancient languages, Herder also saw value in cross-cultural and linguistic exposure to Germany's neighboring countries, even France, whose ubiquity, as previously stated, was thought to stifle the cultivation of the German language and culture.

Herder writes in *Fragmente*,

Wir wollen die Französische Munterkeit, und Freiheit in unsere Abhandlungen einführen, und mit dem Deutschen Nachdruck begleiten. [...] Ich habe seit einiger Zeit meine Nebenstunden auf eine Untersuchung des Lächerlichen in Sitten, und des Lächerlichen in der Vorstellung und dem Ausdruck, nach seinem Hauptbegriff und seinen vielerlei Arten, gewandt: und habe im Französischen wirklich mehr Worte gefunden, weil diese Nation, die ohnedas mehr und lieber lacht, als die Deutschen; mehr Bemerkung aus der Cultur des Umganges zieht, als wir, und sich überhaupt mehr zu erklären weiß, wie die Seele durch den Körper spricht, als unsere Sprache. [...] Und überhaupt hat unsere Sprache durch Übersetzungen [sic] von der Französischen Prose des Umganges seit einigen Jahren schon merklich viel gewonnen. (139-141)

We [Germans] wish to import, with German emphasis, the French liveliness, and freedom into our treatises. I have for some time devoted my spare hours to an

investigation of the ridiculous in manners, and the ridiculous in conception and expression, according to its main concept and its many varieties: and I have actually found more words for it in French, because this nation, which in any case laughs more and more readily than the Germans; draws more observations from the culture of social interaction than we do, and in general knows better how to explain how the soul speaks through the body than our language does. [...] And our language has certainly gained noticeably through translations of French prose in recent years, .

An analysis of Herder's linguistic theories sheds light on how he conceived the relationship between language, itself a constitutive element of a cultural nation, and the political nation. Herder finds value in other languages and cultures. He observed, for example, how cultural differences between the French and Germans are evident in linguistic idiosyncrasies. In *Fragmente*, he calls upon German authors to not merely imitate the prose of the ancient Greeks but rather to understand its historic cultural significance—that is, to conceive of language as a window into culture and history—and adapt German when and where necessary. Herder ends the *Fragmente* by expressing his faith in the German literary project.

Allein, man sieht auch, daß in jeder Gattung der Schreibart kein Genie sich seiner Muttersprache schämen, oder sich über sie beklagen darf, weil überhaupt für einen jeden vortrefflichen Schriftsteller die Gedanken Söhne des Himmels, die Worte, Töchter der Erde sind. (184)

However, one also sees that in every genre of writing no genius should be ashamed of his native language, or complain about it, because for every excellent writer thoughts are the sons of heaven and words the daughters of the earth.

In sum, it is important to keep in mind that a) Herder sees intrinsic value in the literary and cultural productions of other nations and groups, and b) he is opposed to the deliberate stifling of cultural productions by other groups, national, political, or otherwise. These two parameters allow insights into how Herder's thinking on language and culture feeds into his historical and political theories, including his notions of the nation-state and nationalism. Before further examining Herder's political theories of nation, however, I will introduce a thinker with a similar vision of German nationalism based on cultural and linguistic parameters: Johann

Gottlieb Fichte. A comparison of the two sheds light on the particular quality of Herder's nationalism precisely because Fichte (1762-1814), who was Herder's near contemporary, is more commonly associated with stoking the flames of a harmful variant of nationalism—a nationalism that subverts Herder's egalitarian concepts in its reliance on ethnic parameters.<sup>21</sup>

### Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762- 1814)

Fichte is often cited as an early advocate of an aggressive form of German nationalism that was to define the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This rings particularly true when we consider the social and political impact of Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, (*Addresses to the German Nation*, 1806) at a time of European upheaval as a consequence of Napoleon's imperialistic campaigns. Although Herder would not live to see the invasion of the French into German-speaking territories, which is commonly associated with a paradigmatic shift in German nationalistic sentiments, he nonetheless shared some of Fichte's views on the role of language and culture in reinvigorating German national consciousness. In order to excavate some egalitarian and progressive conceptualizations of the nation and nationalism, it is helpful to detail key differences between Herder and Fichte since the latter arguably incited an aggressive, chauvinistic fervor. To shed light on these differences, I will first discuss the circumstances under which Fichte grew up and the political climate in which he developed his philosophical and political thought.

Like Herder, Fichte grew up in a family of modest means. Born in Saxony on May 19, 1762, he was the eldest child of poor and pious ribbon weavers. Fichte was fortunate to be recognized by a local baron, who noticed his intellectual talent and provided monetary support.

---

<sup>21</sup> Herder died in 1803, the same year in which the Napoleonic Wars started. In this regard it is difficult to say exactly how Herder would have reacted to the occupation of German territories by the French.

With the passing of his benefactor, Fichte was forced to find employment as a tutor, a position he was not particularly keen on. After a disappointing interview with Kant, Fichte was resolved to demonstrate his mastery of Kantian philosophy, which resulted in the 1792 publication of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. Fichte's gambit paid off. Kant, impressed by Fichte's understanding of his philosophy, praised the young philosopher. This newfound success ultimately landed Fichte a position in Jena as a professor of philosophy and thus a platform from which he was able to reach a large audience. His rather brazen and energetic demeanor as a public speaker enhanced his fame, and the French Revolution galvanized his thinking.

In the introduction to their 1922 translation of Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*, R.F. Jones and G. H. Turnbull note that "The tracts which the French Revolution inspired Fichte to write at this time, and which established the rights of people on the basis of the inherent moral freedom of man, increased his fame; but at the same time they caused moderate and conservative men to regard him as a radical and dangerous teacher" (xii). This perception of Fichte as a political radical along with his contentious philosophy of religion and his groundbreaking epistemological masterpiece, *Wissenschaftslehre* (Foundations of the Science of Knowledge) gave rise to allegations of atheism in 1798/99. In his essay "On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World," published in his *Philosophical Journal*, Fichte "attempted to sketch some of his preliminary ideas on the topic indicated in the title and simultaneously to give the first clear public hint of the character of a philosophy of religion 'in accordance with the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.'"<sup>22</sup> This ultimately did not calm the waters but rather led to formal charges of atheism, leading to Fichte's dismissal from the University of Jena. The

---

<sup>22</sup> Breazeale, Dan, "Johann Gottlieb Fichte", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/johann-fichte/> (Accessed on 21 July 2025).

invasion of Napoleon's armies into German-speaking territories and the humiliating defeat of the Prussian army at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 forced Fichte to reside in Königsberg. Two years later, he would deliver his *Reden* in Berlin.

When we consider the political circumstances under which Fichte delivered his *Reden*, it becomes easier to see why they present a stark contrast to the ideas espoused by Herder. And yet, it has been argued that Herder, like Fichte, also contributed to the problematic form of nationalism that began to flourish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are indeed similarities between the two philosophers, particularly regarding the role of language in the formation of a cultural nation. Unlike Herder's philosophy, however, Fichte's *Reden* were eagerly received by German nationalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Arash Abizadeh notes in "Was Fichte an Ethnic Nationalist? On Cultural Nationalism and its Double":

the chauvinistic character of the *Reden*'s nationalism, combined with the history of the text's subsequent reception in Germany, which marked it as an icon of German nationalism, has rather too closely tied the *Reden* to the darkest hours of the twentieth century. (334-335)

On the other hand, some scholars see Fichte as a champion of a German nation defined by republican values and untainted by ethnic nationalism. According to Abizadeh, this view is predominant in French scholarship:

In France Fichte is commonly treated as a central figure in the history of modern political philosophy [...] the dominant view that has emerged in France—represented by Fichte scholars such as Xavier Leon, Martial Gueroult, Alain Renaut, Luc Ferry and Etienne Balibar—is that the *Reden*'s nationalism is decisively not of the ethnic variety. (335)

I am inclined to agree with Abizadeh's claim that "while Fichte officially defines nationality in terms of language and culture, his linguistic-cultural nationalism collapses into ethnic nationalism" (334). To illustrate this point, I will briefly parse those components of Fichte's theories that markedly separate him from Herder.

At the beginning of the *Reden*, Fichte sets the stage by defining what he sees as a pivotal moment in German history. As the title indicates, he is quite literally addressing the German nation in an attempt to foster a sense of nationalistic cohesion in response to the invasion and occupation of German soil by French forces. He begins by declaring that the German nation is at a historical precipice, moving from one era to another. Recognizing the volatility of the political situation, he defines who the Germans are in the hopes that they can save the nation:

Bloß von Deutschen und für Deutsche schlechtweg, sagte ich. Wir werden zu seiner Zeit zeigen, daß jedwede andre Einheitsbezeichnung oder Nationalband entweder niemals Wahrheit und Bedeutung hatte, oder, falls es sie gehabt hätte, daß diese Vereinigungspunkte durch unsre dermalige Lage vernichtet, und uns entrissen sind, und niemals wiederkehren können; und daß es lediglich der gemeinsame Grundzug der Deutschheit ist, wodurch wir den Untergang unsrer Nation im Zusammenfließen derselben mit dem Auslande, abwehren, und worin wir ein auf ihm selber ruhendes, und aller Abhängigkeit durchaus unfähiges Selbst, wiederum gewinnen können. Es wird, sowie wir dieses letztere einsehen werden, zugleich der scheinbare Widerspruch dieser Behauptung mit anderweitigen Pflichten, und für heilig gehaltenen Angelegenheiten, den vielleicht dermalen mancher fürchtet, vollkommen verschwinden. (6)

Only of German and simply for Germans, I said. In due course we shall show that any other mark of unity or any other national bond either never had truth and meaning or, if it had, that owing to our present position these bonds of union have been destroyed and torn from us and can never return; it is only by means of the common characteristic of being German that we can avert the downfall of our nation which is threatened by its fusion with foreign peoples, and win back again an individuality that is self-supporting and quite incapable of any dependence upon others. With our perception of the truth of this statement its apparent conflict (feared now, perhaps, by many) with other duties and with matters that are considered sacred will completely vanish. (Translation by Jones and Turnbull)

According to Fichte, finding common national characteristics and defining who the Germans are are critical goals in the unification process. Fichte's proclamation that the Germans must defend against the fusion with foreign peoples [Zusammenfließen derselben mit dem Auslande, abwehren] already highlights exclusionary rhetoric. It is particularly in the fourth address, however, that Fichte makes these contentions.

The fourth address, titled *Hauptverschiedenheit zwischen den deutschen und den übrigen Völkern germanischer Abkunft* (*The Chief Difference between the Germans and the Other Peoples of Germanic Descent*), reflects Fichte's tendency to emphasize ethnic differences. He, like Herder, is highly cognizant of the intrinsic value and role of language in the cultural cohesion of a given nation. As we shall see, however, Fichte's ideas of language and nation ultimately collapse into ethnic parameters as they depend on linguistic/cultural purity (*Reinheit*), whereas Herder's theories remain open and egalitarian in principle; they do not necessitate a linguistic hierarchy or make claims about purity. Indeed, at the beginning of the fourth address, Fichte lays out ethnic parameters which he then identifies with cultural and linguistic characteristics. Fichte writes,

Ferner reicht es hin den Deutschen insbesondere nur im Gegensatze mit den andern neben ihm entstandenen germanischen Völkerstämmen zu bezeichnen; indem andre neuuropäische Nationen, als z. B. die von slawischer Abstammung, sich vor dem übrigen Europa noch nicht so klar entwickelt zu haben scheinen, daß eine bestimmte Zeichnung von ihnen möglich sei, andre aber von der gleichen germanischen Abstammung, von denen der zugleich anzuführende Hauptunterscheidungsgrund nicht gilt, wie die Skandinavier hier unbezweifelt für Deutsche genommen werden, und unter allen den allgemeinen Folgen unsrer Betrachtung mit begriffen sind. (55)

Further, it is sufficient to distinguish the German particularly, in contrast only to the other Teutonic peoples who came into existence with him. Other neo-European nations, as, for instance, those of Slav descent, do not seem as yet to have developed distinctly enough in comparison with the rest of Europe to make it possible to give a definite description of them; whereas other of the same Teutonic descent, as, for instance, the Scandinavians, although the main reason for differentiation (which will be stated immediately) does not apply to them, are yet regarded here as indisputably Germans, and included in all the general consequences of our observations. (Jones and Turnbull, 52-53)

From a contemporary vantage point, Fichte's singling out of Slavic versus "Teutonic" nations is troubling as it bears the hallmarks of Nazi ideologies. In defining who the Germans are based on geographical and ethnic parameters, Fichte is then able to prescribe linguistic parameters for these groups. He continues,

Somit ist unsre nächste Aufgabe, den unterscheidenden Grundzug des Deutschen vor den andern Völkern germanischer Abkunft zu finden, gelöst. Die Verschiedenheit ist sogleich bei der ersten Trennung des gemeinschaftlichen Stammes entstanden, und besteht darin, dass der Deutsche eine bis zu ihrem ersten Ausströmen aus der Naturkraft lebendige Sprache redet, die übrigen germanischen Stämme eine nur auf der Oberfläche sich regende, in der Wurzel aber todte Sprache (61-62)

With this our immediate task is performed, which was to find the characteristic that differentiates the German from the other peoples of Teutonic descent. The difference arose at the moment of the separation of the common stock and consists in this, that the German speaks a language which has been alive ever since it first issued from the force of nature, whereas the other Teutonic races speak a language which has movement on the surface only but is dead at the root.

Fichte's depreciation of the languages of other nations as "dead" is highly problematic. For Fichte, a living language holds much more value than a dead one. According to Fichte, Germans have grown up in rich cultural-linguistic regions and are therefore far better suited to the task at hand: the creation of a German nation. The question of purity for Fichte then boils down to that of natural inheritance [aus der Naturkraft], and language is the metric by which to assess this inheritance. For those Germanic peoples who have strayed outside of the area of linguistic influence, ostensibly learning other languages and cultural traditions, their link to what constitutes a pure (*rein*) German sphere of influence will have been tainted. Language, as the dominant purveyor of cognition and cultural tradition, is transmitted from generation to generation. Those who have remained in purely German spheres, steeped in the tradition of the language, are thus the only ones able to truly integrate and understand the culture.

So verhält es sich, sage ich, mit einer Sprache, die von dem ersten Laute an, der in demselben Volke ausbrach, ununterbrochen aus dem wirklichen gemeinsamen Leben dieses Volkes sich entwickelt hat, und in die niemals ein Bestandteil gekommen, der nicht eine wirklich erlebte Anschauung dieses Volks und eine mit allen übrigen Anschauungen desselben Volks im allseitig eingreifenden Zusammenhange stehende Anschauung ausdrückte. (57)

Such is the case, I say, with a language which, from the time the first sound broke forth among the same people, has developed continuously out of the actual common life of this people, and into which no element has ever entered that did not express an observation

actually experienced by this people, and, moreover, an observation standing in a connection of wide-spread reciprocal influence with all the other observations of the same people. (Jones and Turnbill, 61-62)

Clearly, there are some similarities to the notions espoused by Herder. Both see language in organic, natural terms. Both recognize the propensity of culture to propagate from within a given linguistically defined territory. Fichte and Herder disagree, however, with respect to the exceptionality of the German cultural-linguistic status. Fichte, unlike Herder, ultimately views foreign influence as a hindrance instead of an enriching factor. Even so, Fichte does not condemn the influence of foreign elements on the German sphere of culture and language outright, so long as it does not interfere with German linguistic cultivation. He continues,

Lasset dem Stammvolke dieser Sprache noch so viele einzelne andern Stammes und anderer Sprache einverleibt werden; wenn es diesen nur nicht verstattet wird, den Umkreis ihrer Anschauungen zu dem Standpunkte, von welchem von nun an die Sprache sich fortentwickle, zu erheben, so bleiben diese stumm in der Gemeinde und ohne Einfluß auf die Sprache, so lange, bis sie selbst in den Umkreis der Anschauung des Stammvolks hineingekommen sind, und so bilden nicht sie die Sprache, sondern die Sprache bildet sie. (63)

It does not matter if ever so many individuals of other races and other languages are incorporated with the people speaking this language; provided the former are not permitted to bring the sphere of their observations up to the position from which the language is thereafter to develop, they remain dumb in the community and without influence on the language, until the time comes when they themselves have entered into the sphere of observation of the original people. Hence, they do not form the language; it is the language that forms them. (Jones and Turnbill, 62)

Fichte's statement that foreign influence should remain silent [so bleiben diese stumm in der Gemeinde] essentially negates any agency of individuals who are associated with foreign languages and cultures. They can and must be assimilated into the dominant culture. It is not difficult to see how such ideas could be utilized to stoke nationalistic fervor. Indeed, similar sentiments are still shared by many who foster xenophobia and exclusive nationalism. Tellingly, copies of Fichte's *Reden* were given to German soldiers during the First World War. Fichte's

take on the course of history and the uniqueness of the German character reveals a sense of German exceptionalism that mirrors contemporary manifestations of toxic nationalism. As Abizadeh has pointed out, in this, Fichte's *Reden* promote ethnic discrimination. Abizadeh highlights notions of this exceptionalism as "Fichte's notorious chauvinism" (356). In Fichte's theory, the Germans are in a unique position: they possess a living, active language and are therefore properly equipped to ascend to the next stage of history, in which a German cultural nation would flourish. Such flourishing is possible only if foreign cultural influence does not stifle it. To be sure, Herder also claimed that German language and culture were being stifled by the ubiquity of spoken French, but he did not infer that all forms of contact, mixing, and influence are harmful. Herder saw intrinsic value in all cultures and languages, even French. Fichte's problematic insistence on an ethnically pure German culture devoid of foreign influence is perhaps best illustrated in the thirteenth address:

Die ersten, ursprünglichen und warhaft natürlichen Grenzen der Staaten sind ohne Zweifel ihre inneren Grenzen. Was dieselbe Sprache redet, das ist schon vor aller menschlichen Kunst vorher durch die blosse Natur mit einer Menge von unsichtbaren Banden aneinander geknüpft; es versteht sich untereinander, und ist fähig, sich immerfort klarer zu verständigen, es gehört zusammen, und ist natürlich Eins und ein unzertrennliches Ganzes. Ein Solches kann kein Volk anderer Abkunft und Sprache in sich aufnehmen und mit sich vermischen wollen, ohne wenigstens fürs erste sich zu verwirren, und den gleichmässigen Fortgang seiner Bildung mächtig zu stören. (176)

The first, original, and truly natural boundaries of States are beyond doubt their inner boundaries. Those who speak the same language are, long before any human art begins, by unadorned nature herself already joined together by a multitude of invisible bonds; they understand each other and are capable of making themselves understood to one another ever more clearly; they belong together, and are by nature one, an inseparable whole. Such [a whole] cannot wish to absorb or mix with or: interbreed with any people of different descent and language without at least at first becoming confused and violently disturbing the even progress of its culture. (Abizadeh 355)

It is hard to ignore the implications of this passage in Fichte's *Reden*. Here, Fichte conflates descent and language (*Abkunft und Sprache*), thus promoting a genealogical concept of the nation, which can, in turn, be used to fuel aggressive nationalism.

Despite this emphasis on heritage and bloodline, however, there are also passages in Fichte's early work that point to cosmopolitanism and to an openness towards accepting foreign influence and peoples in building a nation. Richard T. Gray, for example, offers a take on Fichte that speaks to national inclusivity. In his article titled "Economic Romanticism: Monetary Nationalism in Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Adam Müller," he notes that Fichte, before the *Reden*, defines the nation in economic terms.

Seven years prior to his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Speeches to the German Nation), which have become infamous as documents that defend a linguistically and culturally oriented theory of German nationhood based on the self-aggrandizing proposition that the Germans belong together in a national community because they constitute an ordinary, self-identical, and authentic *Urvolk*, Fichte formulates a very different theory of German nationhood based on economic and monetary principles. [...] This is a principally nondiscriminatory theory that includes in the national community all those who participate in its economic exchanges, regardless of race, religious creed, class, etc. (543)

While Fichte may have developed more open and tolerant conceptions of the nation in his economic theories, there was a drastic shift in his assessment of the German nation after the French occupation of German territories. It is not surprising that he would embrace a hostile attitude in the presence of a foreign occupying force. Foreign occupation is a crucial factor in motivating nationalistic and patriotic sentiments and will be discussed throughout this dissertation. It should be noted, however, that even the *Reden* contain passages that suggest non-ethnic parameters of the nation.

Fichte's seventh address, titled "Noch tiefere Erfassung der Ursprünglichkeit und Deutschheit eines Volkes" (Even Deeper Understanding of the Originality and Germanness of a People), expounds further upon his concept of "*Urvolk*" (ancestral people) and the properties

attributed to it. In this address, Fichte is concerned with the activity of the *Volk* in their pursuit of a German nation. Activity is crucial in Fichte's brand of German Idealism—a philosophical doctrine concerning the appearance of things and the things in themselves (*Ding an sich*). Fichte frequently references the dichotomy of activity-life and inaction-death. For Fichte, purpose and recognition of life manifest as a desire for action, a striving that seeks to affirm the self, whereby the self can be defined as a super-personal entity. Isaiah Berlin is chief among scholars to recognize this. Berlin highlights such activity in *The Roots of Romanticism*:

From this he [Fichte] expands the whole vast vision which then proceeds to dominate the imaginations of the Romantics, whereby the only thing which is worthwhile, as I have tried to explain, is the exfoliation of a particular self, its creative activity, its imposition of forms upon matter, its penetration of other things, its creation of values, its dedication of itself to these values. This can have its political implications, as I hinted, if the self is no longer identified with the individual but with some super-personal entity, such as a community or a Church or a State or a class, which then becomes a huge intrusive forward-marching will, which imposes its particular personality both upon the outside world and upon its own constituent elements, which might be human beings, who are thereby reduced to the role simply of ingredients of, or parts in, some much bigger, much more impressive, much more historically persistent personality. (109)

Berlin then goes on to cite Fichte's seventh address, which offers, in part, a more flexible and open conceptualization of the activity and building of the German nation. Fichte writes:

In der Nation, die bis auf diesen Tag sich das Volk schlechtweg oder Deutsche nennt, ist in der neuen Zeit wenigstens bis jetzt Ursprüngliches an den Tag hervorgebrochen, und Schöpferkraft des Neuen hat sich gezeigt; jetzt wird endlich dieser Nation durch eine in sich selbst klar gewordene Philosophie der Spiegel vorgehalten, in welchem sie mit klarem Begriffe erkenne, was sie bisher ohne deutliches Bewußtsein durch die Natur ward, und wozu sie von derselben bestimmt ist; und es wird ihr der Antrag gemacht, nach diesem klaren Begriffe und mit besonnener und freier Kunst, vollendet und ganz, sich selbst zu dem zu machen, was sie sein soll, den Bund zu erneuern und ihren Kreis zu schließen. Der Grundsatz, nach dem sie diesen zu schließen hat, ist ihr vorgelegt; was an Geistigkeit und Freiheit dieser Geistigkeit glaubt, und die ewige Fortbildung dieser Geistigkeit durch Freiheit will, das, wo es auch geboren sei, und in welcher Sprache es rede, ist unsers Geschlechts, es gehört uns an und es wird sich zu uns thun. Was an Stillstand, Rückgang und Zirkeltanz glaubt, oder gar eine todte Natur an das Ruder der Weltregierung setzt, dieses, wo es auch geboren sei, und welche Sprache es rede, ist undeutsch und fremd für uns, und es ist zu wünschen, daß es je eher je lieber sich gänzlich von uns abtrenne. (103)

In the nation which to this very day calls itself simply the people, or Germans, originality has broken forth into the light of day in modern times, at any rate up to now, and the power of creating new things has shown itself. Now, at last, through a philosophy that has become clear in itself, the mirror is being held up to this nation, in which it may recognize and form a clear conception of that which it hitherto became by nature without being distinctly conscious of it, and to which it is called by nature; and a proposal is being made to this nation to make itself wholly and completely what it ought to be, to do this according to that clear conception and with free and deliberate art, to renew the alliance, and to close its circle. The principle according to which it has to close its circle is laid before it: to those who believe in spiritual reality, those who believe in the freedom of the life of the spirit, those who believe in the eternal progress of the spirit through freedom, whatever be their native land, whatever the language which they speak, they are our race, they are part of our people, or they will join it late or soon. All those who believe in arrested being, in retrogression, in eternal cycles, even those who believe in inanimate nature, and put her at the helm of the world, whatever be their native country, whatever be their language, they are not Germans, they are strangers to us, and it is to be wished that the sooner the better it will separate itself completely from us.

This quote stands in rather stark contrast to other statements by Fichte throughout the *Reden* concerning the *Volk* and German nation and although it does not espouse the same ethnic parameters the passages are nonetheless somewhat troubling as they still seem to hint at a rejection of difference. This rejection of difference is directed against those who would seek to deny the essence of Germaness/culture [*Geistigkeit*]. Berlin notes:

This, to do Fichte justice, was not a chauvinistic German sermon, because by Germans he meant, as Hegel meant, all the Germanic peoples; that makes it perhaps not very much better, but a little better. This category includes the French, it includes the English, it includes all the Nordic peoples, and it includes some of the Mediterranean peoples as well. Even so, the heart of the sermon is not simply patriotism, or simply an attempt to arouse the waning German spirit, crushed under the heel of Napoleon. The main thing is this broad distinction between those who are alive and those who are dead, those who are echoes and those who are voices, those who are annexes and those who are the genuine article, the genuine building. (111-112)

Berlin draws attention to Fichte's rather broad notion of "Germanic peoples," but the differentiation of the "undeutschen" and the true Germans still raises troubling questions. While Fichte may not endorse a purely ethnocentric brand of nationalism, he calls for the exclusion of all individuals who do not conform to his notion of Germaness. At best, Fichte's theory of the

nation is inconsistent. Even though much of the *Reden* promotes ethnic purity, there are moments when Fichte seems open to an intercultural concept of the nation. While parts of the *Reden* sustain inclusivity, they are overshadowed by other passages that favor chauvinistic exclusivity. Compared with Fichte's ethnocentric concept of the nation, Herder's open-ended and tolerant notion appears in a more favorable light. It is hard to say what attitude Herder would have adopted had he lived long enough to witness the occupation of German territory by the French. It is possible that such a shocking political experience would have awakened in him a more aggressive nationalism. As it stands, however, the discrepancies in thought between Fichte and Herder demonstrate fundamentally different concepts of a cultural nation. Fichte's theories are more susceptible to nationalistic appropriation and should be treated with caution. Let us then continue with an analysis of Herder's theories concerning history and politics.

### Herder on History and Politics

From Herder's linguistic theories, we now move into the realm of his political and historical philosophy. Indeed, his linguistic theory forms the foundation on which his other theories are built. Herder's philosophy evolved from his focus on culture and language onward into considerations of history and politics via historical retrospection through an anthropological lens. In all his works, Herder is concerned with the specific linguistic, cultural, and geographical elements that shape any given society throughout history. Concerning the study of native literatures, Herder writes in the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*,

[Wir] lernen Zeiten und Nationen gewiß tiefer kennen als auf dem täuschenden trostlosen Wege ihrer politischen und Kriegsgeschichte. In dieser sehen wir selten mehr von einem Volke, als wie es sich regieren und töten ließ; in jener lernen wir, wie es dachte, was es

wünschte und wollte, wie es sich erfreute, und von seinen Lehrern oder von seinen Neigungen geführt ward.<sup>23</sup>

We learn to know ages and peoples more deeply than along the deceptive, desolate path of their political and military history. In the latter we seldom see more than the manner in which a people was ruled, how it let itself be slaughtered; in the former we learn how it thought, what it wished and craved for, how it took its pleasures, how it was led by its teachers or its inclinations. (Berlin, 239)

When Herder took up the positions of court pastor and general superintendent in Weimar, a move facilitated in part by his then good friend Goethe in 1776, he had established a solid foundation for his study of history and humankind. As has been discussed, Herder's philosophy, including his linguistic theories, is informed by his concept of *Humanität*. The notion of *Humanität* is particularly relevant in Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1774-1791), *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), and *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (1793-1797). The goal of these works is to provide an assessment of human progress, of the proclivities and inclinations that inspired humanity throughout history. Just as Herder took stock of the state of German literature in his linguistic theories, in *This Too a Philosophy of History*, he assessed contemporary historical and political affairs. In other words, Herder asks whether or not the condition of humankind has improved or worsened over time. The metric by which he assesses progress again stems from his concept of *Humanität*.

In many ways, Herder's appraisal of human progress at the time he wrote *Auch eine Philosophie* and started *Ideen* (1774) anticipates the revolutionary events in the American colonies and later in France. Although Herder, who was more or less relegated to administrative duties, did not hold a position that afforded him agency in the political sphere, he nonetheless contributed greatly to our understanding of political theory. Moreover, Herder's political theory

---

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/herder/humanita/chap010.html> (Accessed on 11 May 2020).

differed from other contemporary theories, including Fichte's, in important ways. Herder developed his positions not only in opposition to Kant but also parted ways with Schiller and Goethe and all of Weimar Classicism. It is particularly in this context that Herder's ideas relating to nationalism and patriotism emerge clearly as a counterforce to xenophobia and the rise of autocratic political figures. Let us then consider his historical and political philosophies further.

At least in part, Herder engaged in political philosophizing in response to the economic shift in production modalities that accompanied European colonialism. Ironically, both the transformation of the economy and Europe's imperial endeavors can be attributed to the shift in thought brought about by the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thought questioned the authority of religion along with absolutist forms of governance, while simultaneously introducing new forms of oppression, such as the exploitation of workers and outright slavery—a consequence of a newly industrialized and nationalized system of commerce. The notion that the Enlightenment simultaneously brought progress and a new sense of rationality whilst also creating new power structures and forms of subjugation is a foundational insight. This is, of course, a critique famously formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which links the horrors of 20th-century fascism to Enlightenment-era principles. Horkheimer and Adorno contend that it is impossible to overcome these oppressive systems since we are all their products—trapped in a system that shapes our very existence. Seen in this light, the Enlightenment simply replaced one set of power structures with another. As Stephen Eric Bronner writes in *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, “For them [Horkheimer and Adorno], the basic situation is obvious: instrumental rationality is the problem, the commodity form is the culprit, and the culture industry is the enemy. There is no alternative. There is only an ongoing resistance waged in the name of an always elusive, if supposedly genuine, experience of

individuality” (64). I argue that Herder intuited this problematic dialectic and sought to combat hypertrophic forms of rationality, which, he believed, had refashioned the political climate for the worse.

Herder’s critique of rationality is particularly evident in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774). Herder criticizes the hypocrisy of those who consider the European Enlightenment the pinnacle of human progress whilst not acknowledging the ailments that continue to plague the era. He laments:

Die *dunkeln* Seiten dieses Zeitraums stehn in allen Büchern?: jeder klassische Schöndenker, der die Polizierung unsers Jahrhunderts fürs non plus ultra der Menschheit hält, hat Gelegenheit ganze Jahrhunderte auf *Barbarei, elendes Staatsrecht, Aberglauben und Dummheit, Mangel der Sitten und Abgeschmacktheit*—in *Schulen, und Landsitzen, in Tempeln, in Klöstern, in Rathäusern, in Handwerkszünften, in Hütten und Häusern* zu schmälern und über das *Licht* unsers Jahrhunderts, das ist, über seinen *Leichtsinn und Ausgelassenheit*, über seine *Wärme* in *Ideen* und *Kälte* in *Handlungen*, über seine *scheinbare Stärke* und *Freiheit*, und über seine wirkliche *Todesschwäche* und *Ermattung* unter *Unglauben, Despotismus* und *Üppigkeit* zu lobjauchzen. Davon sind alle Bücher unserer *Voltaire* und *Hume, Roberston* und *Iselins* voll, und es wird ein so schön Gemälde, wie sie die Aufklärung und Verbesserung der Welt aus den trüben Zeiten zum Deismus und Despotismus der Seelen d. i. zu *Philosophie* und *Ruhe* herleiten—daß dabei jedem Liebhaber seiner Zeit das Herz lacht. (51)

The *dark* sides of this period of time registered in all the books: every classical humanist who considers our century’s civil administration the non plus ultra of humanity has an opportunity to reduce whole centuries to *barbarism, miserable state authority, superstition* and *stupidity, lack of ethics* and *tastelessness*—in *schools, in country seats, in temples, in monasteries, in town halls, in artisans’ guilds, in huts and houses*, and to rave about our century’s *light*, that is, about its *superficiality* and *unrestraint*, about its *warmth* in *ideas* and its *coldness* in *actions*, about its *seeming strength* and *freedom*, and about its real *weakness-unto death* and *exhaustion* under *unbelief, despotism, and luxury*. All the books of our *Voltaire* and *Hume, Robertson’s* and *Iselin’s*, are full of this, and it becomes such a beautiful picture how they derive the enlightenment and improvement of the world from the times of gloom up to the deism and despotism of souls, i.e. up to *philosophy* and *tranquility*, that the heart of every lover of his age laughs in contemplating it. (Forster 307-308)

As this quote shows, Herder is most critical of the influence of the Enlightenment on the development of nations, authority, and governance. Indeed, perhaps the most powerful

motivation for Herder's egalitarianism both within societies and between nations derives from his deep-seated opposition to anti-authoritarianism. In *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke point out, "Herder critically applied the main principles of Enlightenment—abolition of authority as an argument in itself; freedom and responsibility of the individual in thinking and acting; equality among all those who join community based on the aforementioned principles—to the contemporary discourse of Enlightenment itself" (8). In this regard Herder was at odds with many of his contemporaries.

Adler and Koepke continue,

He criticized the rationalism of Christian Wolff (1679-1754), who was the most influential German philosopher during the first half of the eighteenth century and developed an encyclopedic system of rationalist philosophy. Wolff's reductionist understanding of philosophy did not allow for the idea of a history of reason and hence was not an acceptable model for Herder. He also started a feud with his former teacher Kant because it seemed absolutely erroneous to him to found a philosophy on 'a determination of all pure cognitions *a priori* [that is, before any experience]'. For Herder, this was an epistemological approach to the fundament of human knowledge based on assumptions that were impossible to prove (9).

I have already discussed traces of Herder's pushback against Enlightenment's overbearing rationality via his theory of language; the rejection of a purely rationalistic, pragmatic form of language devoid of any poetic elements. One of the central claims of this investigation of Herder's nationalism rests on his firm opposition to oppression and state-sanctioned violence. He writes in the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*,

Eine traurige Übersicht gäbe es, wenn man jede geschriebene Geschichte der Völker in ihren Kriegen und Eroberungen, in ihren Unterhandlungen, in ihren Handelsentwürfen *nach den Grundsätzen* durchginge, in welchen gehandelt und geschrieben wurde. Wie ehrlicher waren unsre Väter, die alten Barbaren, die bei ihren Zweikämpfen nicht nur auf Gleichheit der Waffen sahen, sondern Platz, Licht und Sonne unparteiisch theilten! Wie ehrlicher sind die Wilden in ihren Unterhandlungen und Friedensschlüssen, in ihrem Tausch und Handel! Gewalt und Willkür mögen gebieten, worüber sie Macht haben, nur nicht über *Grundsätze des Rechts und Unrechts in der Menschengeschichte* (708)

It would yield a sad overview if one went through each written history of peoples in their wars and conquests, in their negotiations, in their plans for action, according to the first principles on which their action and writing took place. How much more honorable were our ancestors, the ancient barbarians, who in their duels not only saw to equality of weapons, but also shared position, light, and sun without bias. How much more honorable are the savages in their negotiations and peace treaties, in their barter and trade! Force and arbitrariness may command concerning things over which they have power, but not concerning first principles of right and wrong in human history. (Forster, 399)

According to Isaiah Berlin's *Three Critics of Enlightenment*, Herder "sharply differs from the central thought of the French Enlightenment," in that he rejects "the very notion of impassable barriers in nature or experience" (245). That is to say, unlike Kant's understanding of ontological truth as impossible to discern, Herder believes that the truth of being can indeed be understood via experience. Berlin points to the difference in philosophical thought between Herder and Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Descartes. Notably, Berlin lists three concepts that are relevant in this context: populism, expressionism, and pluralism. Let us then consider these terms in depth, as their meanings differ from contemporary usages.

In his analysis of Herder, Berlin describes *populism* as "the belief in the value of belonging to a group or a culture, which, for Herder at least, is not political, and is indeed, to some degree, anti-political, different from and even opposed to nationalism" (218). As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, a sense of community is intimately tied to Herder's theories of language, in which sentiments of belonging are rooted in linguistic similarities. In other words, the modes in which we think and live, as expressed via language, shape our social formations and associations, including those of the *nation*.

*Expressionism*, not to be conflated with the artistic movement, is "the doctrine that human activity in general, and art in particular, express the entire personality of the individual or the group, and are intelligible only to the degree to which they do so" (218). Expressionism is

central to Herder's theories on literature. Herder understood literature as a production of art, an expression of a given culture at a specific point in history. As such, it is only truly accessible to those who experienced this specific time and place; thus, Germans of the 18<sup>th</sup> century cannot capture the essence of Greek classics.

Lastly, *pluralism* is "the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability, of the values of different cultures and societies, and, in addition, in the incompatibility of equally valid ideals, together with the implied revolutionary corollary that the classical notions of an ideal man and of an ideal society are intrinsically incoherent and meaningless" (218-219). This view accentuates Herder's notion that every nation has its own center of happiness. This kind of pluralism can also be attributed to Herder's cultural relativist point of view, a notion for which he has also been criticized. While Herder sees incommensurability between nations, he also paradoxically attaches to them the universality of *Humanität*.

Berlin states further that "Each of these three theses is relatively novel; all are incompatible with the central moral, historical and aesthetic doctrines of the Enlightenment. They are not independent of each other. Everything in the illimitable, varied, and exceedingly rich panorama which Herder's works present is interwoven. Indeed, the notion of unity in difference, still more that of differences in unity, the tension of the one and the many, is his obsessive *idée maîtresse*" (219). Indeed, Herder was convinced that humankind is too variegated to submit to a universal system of classification. Herder was in essence, assessing the idiosyncrasies of civilizations to date. His *Ideen* and *Philosophie* can be understood as an attempt to assess the defining characteristics of his time in relation to the historical progress of civilization.

In this vein, the intro of *Auch eine Philosophie* begins with Herder contemplating the political life cycles (*Kreislauf*) of nations. As in his other writings, here too Herder relies on organic metaphors to describe historical, social, and political developments as natural processes of growth and decay. In particular, he is concerned with how virtues and vices influence the conduct of certain cultures and societies.

Every people, like every art and science, has its period of growth, bloom, and decline. And since the first of these usually coincides with the times of virtue and need, the last with those of luxury and rest, between which the middle, highest peak only occupies a short time, and perhaps the very minimum that could be conceded to it, precisely from this have arisen the pervasive questions about national poverty and luxury, industry and rest, virtues and vices. (Forster 269)

In his evaluation of cultural decline, Herder sets up a dichotomy to assess the state of Europe compared to that of other, predominantly Eastern, that is, Asian, civilizations. For Herder, Europe had reached a historic dusk: advanced in the cycle of its life, it lacks the emotional and spiritual vitality necessary for a virtuous life, i.e., for *Humanität*. He calls for sympathy and understanding, i.e., feeling and heart. According to Forster, Herder “believed that this project had a special historical urgency in his day because since the Renaissance and the Reformation the moral values that people profess, such as love of humanity, freedom, and honor, have largely become hollow, no longer genuinely anchored in moral sentiments, and therefore fail to serve the social function to which they would correspond.”<sup>24</sup>

Herder posits an analogy between biological age and historical progress. To Herder, Europe at its current stage in history, and its highly advanced technology and economy, was like a callous old man bereft of sympathy and emotion, whereas less developed nations were experiencing an era of youth and innocence—invigorated by a keener sense of emotion. At its core, Herder’s project attempts to identify the driving forces of a given society or nation. He

---

<sup>24</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/herder/> (Accessed on 22 April 2025)

insists on preserving cultural and national differences while exploring points of contact and similarities between different eras and civilizations. Each nation and each culture has “its own center of happiness,” its own ways of life; no other nation or culture can say that it is better or worse than another. These tenets underline Herder’s emphasis on tolerance and pluralism; at the same time, Herder’s concept of *Humanität* implies a universalist, monist stance. As Damon Linker points out in his article, “Herder’s Reluctant Pluralism,” “Read in the context of the works in which they are found, Herder’s most pluralistic pronouncements can be seen to be inextricably tied to a larger project: namely, the construction of a teleological philosophy of world history whose aim is to mediate between the extremes of complete pluralistic diversity and homogeneous monism” (270). This brings up a seemingly contradictory stance in Herder’s thought. How does he reconcile his notions of pluralism, which tends to imply a relativist perspective,<sup>25</sup> with the monist stance espoused by the concept of *Humanität*?

The contradiction between pluralism and monism has been investigated by a number of scholars, perhaps most notably by Isaiah Berlin. Berlin’s notion of pluralism, previously discussed, responds to the conundrum of Herder’s relativist point of view. Let us revisit Berlin’s definition of pluralism: “the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability, of the values of different cultures and societies, and, in addition, in the incompatibility of equally valid ideals, together with the implied revolutionary corollary that the classical notions of an ideal man and of an ideal society are intrinsically incoherent and meaningless” (218-219). Here, Berlin highlights that Herder’s theory does not allow for a “classical notion of an ideal man” or

---

<sup>25</sup> The notion of *pluralism* as defined by Berlin and as it functions in Herder’s theories is closely related to the notion of *relativism*. Where the former is concerned with the acknowledgment and acceptance of the multitude of political, religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial factors that make up groups of peoples, the latter suggests that no basis of comparison or judgement can be applied to said components. They are inherently incommensurable. This sentiment is frequently espoused by Herder when he discusses *pluralism*. Linker points out, “for Herder, pluralism implies relativism, if not logically, then psychologically” (276).

society since this would apply to only one of many societies. This is indeed a contradiction that even Herder does not seem to be able to resolve since, as previously stated, *Humanität* is applied as a universal theory.

A relativist point of view, as outlined by Berlin, conflicts with the assumption of moral tenets that are held to be universally applicable across cultural and national lines. For example, a relativist might not condemn a nation's hostility against another since such hostility could be seen to be rooted in its cultural and moral fiber, a product of its particular time and space. To some extent, Herder embraces cultural relativism, but only if it does not disrupt a given people's freedom to seek happiness and flourish. In light of this relativism, what then are the implications of Herder's universal application of *Humanität*? As Herder famously wrote in *Auch eine Philosophie*, "Jede nation hat ihren *Mittelpunkt* der Glückseligkeit *in sich*, wie jede Kugel ihren *Schwerpunkt!*" (39; Each nation has its *center* of happiness *in itself*, like every sphere its center of gravity). While the conditions that facilitate happiness may change along with the stage of development, climate, etc., the drive for happiness itself is a constant. Herder is convinced that mankind shares this striving towards happiness, which finds fulfillment in the ideal of *Humanität*. The pursuit of happiness, however, is disrupted when nations decide to go to war or subjugate one another. These thoughts are most prominently discussed in Herder's *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, which I will expound upon later.

Given Herder's strong aversion to all forms of institutionalized violence, he would most certainly not consider violent forms of expression 'progress'. Indeed, violent action goes against the very core of his concept of *Humanität*. For Herder, humanity strives towards realizing its full potential. Herder's investigation of different historical ages and societies parses moments of activity that advance humanity towards this goal. As Linker notes,

For, according to Herder, ‘even in the seemingly greatest chaos’ one can find ‘constant nature, that is to say, immutable laws of a highest necessity, goodness, and wisdom’ that are oriented toward the realization of a divinely ordained end in the historical process as a whole. Herder comes to describe this end as ‘Humanity’ and to see it as the task of a ‘genuine philosophy of man’ to detect and trace its development as it is progressively realized over time in the cultural norms, practices, and beliefs that prevail within history. (281)

Indeed, for Herder, goodness and wisdom are crucial: “die Menschheit bleibt immer nur Menschheit—und doch wird ein *Plan des Fortstrebens* sichtbar—mein großes Thema!” (*Auch eine Philosophie* 40; Humanity ever remains only humanity—and yet a *plan of striving* further becomes visible—my great theme!, Forster 298).

Throughout Herder’s work, there is a tension between monism and pluralism. The title of Linker’s article, “Herder’s Reluctant Pluralism,” hints at a dilemma: If different eras and civilizations are incommensurate, then any metric used to assess progress or morality would be invalid. Life would, at least in Herder’s view, be a chaotic void with no purpose. According to Linker, Herder “was convinced that a complete pluralism teaches a truth about mankind and the world that is incompatible with the necessary conditions of human happiness as he understands them” (274). *Humanität* means reaching for a higher purpose, a better condition. Thus, while it is true that for Herder, societies are incommensurable, they share a common sense of greater purpose and striving. Herder historically locates this striving within the nexus of religion.

To claim that religion, which for Herder means Christianity, was, historically, a harbinger of tolerance, happiness, and human progress ignores a long history of violence, including crusades and trials of heretics and witches, perpetrated in the name of a god. Herder is not oblivious to these facts and in turn offers a “purified form of Christianity” (Linker, 284), which he describes as “die *lauterste Philosophie der Sittenlehre, die reinste Theorie der Wahrheiten und Pflichten*, von allen Gesetzen, und kleinen Landverfassungen *unabhängig*, kurz wenn man

will, *der menschenliebendste Deismus*” (*Auch eine Philosophie* 47; “the most *unadulterated philosophy of ethical doctrine, the purest theory of truths and duties, independent* of all laws and little territorial constitutions, in short, if you like, the most *human-loving deism*,” Forster 304).

Herder sees great value in the moral values taught by a form of Christianity that is stripped of tyranny and persecution. Linker describes it as such:

Herder claims that the purified essence of Christianity’s deepest teaching is at odds with any administrative or institutional organization, the imposition of which onto that teaching inevitably has the effect of degrading it to the level of the oppressive and mechanistic social relations characteristic of the modern, secular state. [...] Herder proposes a religion based entirely on a doctrine of spontaneous brotherly love—one in which we are able to sympathize with one another despite our radical differences. (284)

It is perhaps difficult to divorce this idealistic conceptualization of Christianity from its legacy of persecution and authoritarianism, a legacy that is still visible today. Indeed, in many modern nation-states, national identity is deeply tied to religion as religion continues to influence our imaginings of the nation. Unfortunately, in contemporary society, exclusionary forms of religious worship are on the rise. As Linker notes, “In the age of deconstruction, it is safe to say that very few are going to be tempted to worship at the altar of Herder’s humanitarian God” (292). And yet, Herder’s “purified Christianity” contains the conditions for a more egalitarian, understanding, and peaceful community, a nation founded in *Humanität*. And while I have argued that Herder’s overall doctrines speak to these core values, there are a few remaining skeletons in his closet that warrant further exploration.

## Herder and Eurocentrism

Aside from Herder's somewhat contradictory relativism, he has also been criticized for his representations of non-European peoples. Let us consider a few examples. We have already analyzed a handful of texts that reveal the figures of thought that characterize Herder's assessment of the development of civilizations throughout history, including organicism and constructs of language. We return to his use of age as a metaphor for historical development.

Herder writes in *Philosophie*:

*Morgenland*, du hiezu recht auserwählter Boden Gottes! die *zarte Empfindlichkeit* dieser Gegenden, mit der raschen, fliegenden Einbildung, die so gern alles in göttlichen Glanz kleidet: *Ehrfurcht* vor allem, was Macht, Ansehn, Weisheit, Kraft, Fußstapfe Gottes ist, und so dann gleich kindliche *Ergebung*, die sich ihnen natürlich, uns Europäern unbegreiflich, mit dem Gefühl von Ehrfurcht mischet: der wehrlose, zerstreute, ruheliebende, *Herdenähnliche Zustand* des Hirtenlebens [...] der menschliche Geist bekam die ersten Formen von Weisheit und Tugend mit einer *Einfalt, Stärke* und *Hoheit*, die nun—gerade herausgesagt—in unsrer philosophischen, kalten europäischen Welt wohl nichts, gar nichts ihres gleichen hat. Und eben wie wir so unfähig sind, sie mehr zu *verstehen!* zu *fühlen!* geschweige denn zu genießen—so *spotten* wir, *leugnen* und *mißdeuten!* (16-17)

*Orient*, you land of God truly chosen for this! The *delicate sensitivity* of these regions, with the quick, flying imagination that so likes to clothe everything in a divine radiance; *reverence* for everything that is might, respect, wisdom, force, footstep of God, and then immediately childlike *submission*, which for them naturally, for us Europeans incomprehensibly, mixes with the feeling of reverence; the defenseless, dispersed, tranquility-loving *flock-like condition* of the shepherd's life [...] The human spirit received the first forms of wisdom and virtue with a *simplicity, strength*, and *loftiness* that now—speaking frankly—in our philosophical, cold, European world surely has nothing, nothing at all, like it. And precisely because we are so incapable of *understanding!* of *feeling!*, it anymore, let alone of enjoying it, we mock, deny, and misinterpret! (277)

From a contemporary vantage, it is easy to see how Herder's depiction is problematic as it paints the "Orient" as infantile and less developed. At the same time, Herder also criticizes Europe, albeit without resorting to demeaning language. By setting up an East-West dichotomy, Herder introduces a hierarchy with a clear Eurocentric bias. To be sure, such language was common in

Herder's time. Herder is in many ways a product of his time and was by no means immune to the biases of 18th-century white, patriarchal European thought. And yet, I argue that Herder's 18th-century perspective on cultural nationalism also implies progressive and egalitarian views.

Herder often casts patriarchal structures as an organic and natural component of historical human development, especially in what he classifies as early, or childlike, stages of development, as in the "Orient." He writes in *Auch eine Philosophie*, "Anfangs unter der *milden Vaterregierung* war nicht eben der Morgenländer mit seinem *zarten Kindessinne* der *glücklichste und folgsamste Lehrling?*" (17; "At the beginning, under *gentle paternal government*, was not precisely the Oriental with his *sensitive child's sense* the *happiest* and most *obedient student?*" Forster 278). The quotes pertaining to the "Orient" envision a sense of paternal governmental guidance of the people informed by religious sentiments and tradition presented as natural and organic modes of existence. Herder's praise of paternalism gives one pause, to be sure. However, it must be understood in relation to Herder's concept of *Humanität*, bridging the gap between the inadequacies of the European lifestyle and what he sees as the emotional, "childlike" qualities of less developed nations. In *Transculturality and German Discourse in the Age of European Colonialism*, Chunjie Zhang argues that

Herder defines feelings as the fundamental trait of being human. In his affective anthropology, it is not Europeans but the slaves of the 'savages' who represent human emotions. Like Kotzebue and Campe, Herder also believes in the eighteenth-century image of the noble savage and contends that a 'savage,' who is closer to the primordial or lower state of human historical development, is more in touch with her feelings than a European is. Although Herder invents the image of the non-Europeans and projects the myth of noble savage onto them, we should also acknowledge this idea as a form of thought that tries, even imaginatively, to integrate non-European cultures and criticizes European moral corruption. (121)

As Zhang points out, although Herder criticizes European morality, he does so from a position of inferred superiority. Herder's critique of Europe and concomitant assessment of the historical

age of the ‘Orient’ invite hierarchical comparisons. This problematic construct sheds light on untenable aspects in Herder’s theories of history and the development of nations and humanity.

In *Auch eine Philosophie*, Herder traces the progression of humanity by making inferences based on the specific climates in which particular civilizations dwelled. As we move from the “childlike” East to the West, we can follow the historical stages of development. As Zhang notes, *Auch eine Philosophie* is “a product manufactured in the nexus of intercultural, colonial, and capitalist power relations. It fosters a Eurocentric geohistorical hierarchy based on the idea of development but also formulates the eruptive notion of cultural relativism” (Zhang 124). Zhang’s argument situates Herder’s assessment of world history in a Eurocentric system that, by virtue of its comparative nature, propagates a narrative of European cultural and economic superiority. Zhang contends that we must reject Herder’s universalist model of historical ages and reassess historical and cultural development anew. “Today it is necessary for us to undo Herder’s geohistorical hierarchy and the historicization of geography and reclaim the independence of geographical and cultural differences from a Eurocentric logic of an all-encompassing universal history” (128). Zhang is right to call out Herder’s problematic application of an “all-encompassing universal history.” At the same time, while Herder certainly developed his theories from a Eurocentric basis, he nonetheless remains highly critical of European institutions. Herder’s condemnation of European oppression remains a throughline in his oeuvre; such criticism speaks to the encompassing sense of sympathy and humanity evident in his later works—namely in the *Briefe*. There are, however, some other potentially problematic issues concerning Herder’s philosophical world views.

Herder has been criticized for espousing seemingly contradictory points of view, or rather for going back on stances he had maintained earlier. As noted in the Herder entry on the online Stanford encyclopedia,

Frederick Beiser has pointed out, that even within *This Too a Philosophy of History* he seems to try to combine it with an assumption of a higher moral standpoint that does in the end permit a sort of comparative ranking of moralities, namely, by invoking an analogy between the historical series of cultures and the different ages of man. Then in the *Ideas* he backs away from it in another way, now asserting that there is a fundamental moral value that is shared by all historical periods and cultures after all, one that can be used as a common measure to assess the overall morality of one period or culture as better or worse than that of another, namely, *humanity* [*Humanität*].

In a sense, Herder's thinking is organized around a central contradiction: he maintains a cultural relativist point of view and expresses an appreciation for difference whilst simultaneously applying universalist theories concerning *Humanität*. This is perhaps the biggest rift that Herder attempts to bridge in his philosophical writings. As Beiser points out, Herder often seems to be pulled in opposite directions. And yet, Herder's notion of *Humanität* is informed by a profound sense of empathy, and his "reluctant relativism" is certainly ahead of its time. Herder anticipates, in this regard, many of the issues we face today living in a modern globalized society, characterized by ethnic and national diversity. Vicki Spencer points out that "according to many contemporary political theorists, increased intercultural interaction accompanying globalization [...] [the need to balance a concern for unity and diversity] is one of the most pressing political challenges facing modern states in the world today" (83). The desire to balance unity and diversity is crucial in Herder's political thought regarding nations and ultimately also informs his masterpiece *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*.

## Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität

Spanning five years, from 1792-1797, the *Briefe* reflect Herder's preoccupation with contemporary political events, in particular, the French Revolution and its fallout. In a broader sense, the revolution served as a catalyst that prompted Herder to programmatically define the core principles of *Humanität*. Herder wished to impart these values to the ruling classes in an attempt to curb authoritarianism, hoping that all governing entities could eventually become both enlightened and compassionate. Herder introduced these potentially radical ideas into literary spheres of influence. The French Revolution was a momentous event in European history; it profoundly influenced German intellectuals, including Herder. Ultimately, the violent fall-out of 1789 would tarnish revolutionary fervor, but desire for German unity remained, nonetheless.

In the first few *Briefe*, Herder parses the ramifications of the French Revolution and the establishment of the first French Republic. Although Herder would not live to witness the occupation of German-speaking territories by the French, the publication of the *Briefe* aligns with the dates of the First Coalition War (1792-1797). French revolutionaries conducted a series of military campaigns against a loose alliance of Austrian and Prussian forces led by their respective monarchs, who responded to the threat the French Revolution posed to their reign. The success of the French revolutionaries had enormous consequences for the scattered German territories. In the early edition of the letters, published in 1792, Herder is preoccupied with revolutionary France. In *The Letters Concerning the Progress of Humanity* (1792) (*Zurückbehaltene und "abgeschnittene" Briefe*), Herder asks,

Wiefern vermag Frankreich sich hierüber mit andern Staaten Europas abzufinden? indem es leider! nicht in Amerika liegt, noch wie Britannien vom Meere begränzt ist. Wird Europa ohne Feindseligkeit und Blutvergiessen es aus seiner sogenannten Waagschale, die eben nicht die Waagschale des Rechts, sondern der Eroberungssucht und alter Familienrechte ist, fallen lassen? (318)

To what extent can France reach an accommodation about [a new constitution] with European states, since, unfortunately!, it is not situated in America nor like Britain bordered by the sea. Will Europe allow it to fall out of its own so-called balance—which is precisely not the balance of justice, but of thirst for conquest and of ancient familiar rights—without hostility and bloodshed? (Forster 366)

Of course, in hindsight, we know the answer to this question. Although Herder did not live to witness the Napoleonic Wars, these conflicts—standing in stark contrast to aspirations for a potentially egalitarian revolution—engendered resentment and fostered nationalism amongst many Germans who perceived them mere instruments of tyrannical aggression. Furthermore, the imperial and colonial ambitions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century France are exemplary of the kinds of European transgressions and atrocities that Herder rails against. In this sense, the surest sign of Herder’s progressive cultural nationalism lies within his steadfast condemnation of war (especially wars that are not explicitly conducted in the name of national self-defense) and colonial/imperialist endeavors.

Throughout his philosophical writings, Herder condemns oppression and violence. He is particularly critical of the subjugation of less developed nations by European nations.<sup>26</sup> The topic of abuse so preoccupied Herder that he even devised a concept of historical revenge named *Nemesis*, thus issuing a “call for a global justice and human dignity that defies the protean nature of time” (Zhang, 154). Here, Herder is primarily concerned with the atrocities and heinous acts of slavery committed by European colonialists. In a much-cited letter of the *Briefe* (10<sup>th</sup> collection, Letter 114), Herder discusses European colonial atrocities in the context of growing political agitation caused by the First Coalition War (1792-1797). Disillusioned and disappointed by the failures of the French Revolution, Herder questions the motivations that lead to war and

---

<sup>26</sup> The use of “nation” here adheres to the early definitions provided at the beginning of this chapter, i.e., a group of people who share cultural and linguistic commonalities. Judged by this standard, many of the subjugated and enslaved peoples of the African continent during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, did not yet possess a nation-state.

peace (van der Laan, 336). The *Zehnte Sammlung* (tenth collection) of the *Briefe* demonstrates how strongly Herder was opposed to state-sanctioned violence and oppression. Zhang points out that “Michael Zaremba, one of Herder’s biographers, calls the tenth collection the credo of Herder’s political theory,” arguing that “European colonialism compels Herder to seriously connect history to ethics and humanistic values” (Zhang, 153). This is readily apparent in the first section of letter 114, where Herder, surveying historical instances of invasion and oppression, castigates predominantly European transgressions, such as religious oppression and colonial subjugation.

Was endlich ist von der Cultur zu sagen, die von *Spaniern, Portugiesen, Engländern* und *Holländern* nach Ost- und Westindien, unter die Neger nach Africa, in die friedlichen Inseln der Südwelt gebracht ist? Schreien nicht alle diese Länder mehr oder weniger um Rache? [...] Nenne man das Land, wohin Europäer kamen und sich nicht durch Beeinträchtigungen, durch ungerechte Kriege, Geiz, Betrug, Unterdrückung, durch Krankheiten und schädliche Gaben an der unbewehrten, zutrauenden Menschheit, vielleicht auf alle Aeonen hinab, versündigt haben! Nicht der weise, sondern der *anmaßende, zudringliche, übervortheilende* Theil der Erde muß unser Welttheil heißen; er hat nicht cultivirt, sondern die Keime eigner Cultur der Völker, wo und wie er nur konnte, zerstört. (672)

What finally, is to be said of the culture that has been brought by *Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, and Dutchmen* to the East and West Indies, to Africa among the negroes, into the peaceful islands of the southern world? Do not all these lands, more or less, cry for revenge? [...] Let the land be named to which Europeans have come without having sinned against defenseless, trusting humanity, perhaps for all eons to come, through injurious acts, through unjust wars, greed, deceit, oppression, through disease and harmful gifts! Our part of the world must be called, not the wise, but the *presumptuous, pushing, tricking* part of the earth; it has not cultivated but has destroyed the shoots of peoples’ own cultures wherever and however it could. (Forster 381-382)

According to Herder, Europeans have failed miserably at cultivating any semblance of *Humanität*. It is not only the subjugation and oppression of less developed nations by Europeans that concerns Herder. He is also acutely aware of the hostilities of “enlightened” European nations against one another. Herder asks at the beginning of the 114<sup>th</sup> letter, “Aber warum müssen Völker auf Völker wirken, um einander die Ruhe zu stören? Man sagt, der fortgehend

wachsenden Cultur wegen; wie gar etwas Anders sagt das Buch der Geschichte!” (Ibid 670; But why must peoples have effect on peoples in order to disturb each other’s peace? It is said that this is for the sake of progressively growing culture; but what a completely different thing the book of history says!, Forster, 380). Although a future of nations living in harmony, in a state of *Humanität*, is unlikely, Herder nonetheless advocates for a system of *Bildung* that continues to push humanity closer to this goal.

In the 119th letter of the *Briefe*, Herder lays out a program intended to foster long-lasting peace. This letter further develops thoughts expressed in the 118<sup>th</sup> letter, which tells the story of warring indigenous nations in North America, near Philadelphia. Fearing the annihilation of all tribes involved in the territorial conflicts, a council suggested that one of the nations should act as “*woman*,” that is, as the allegorical peacekeeper. This *woman* was to stand between the warring nations and check their hostilities:

Die *Frau* soll nicht in den Krieg ziehen, sondern so viel möglich den Frieden zu erhalten suchen. Wenn also die *Männer* um sie herum sich einmal mit einander schlagen und der Krieg heftig werden will, so soll die *Frau* Macht haben, selbige anzureden und zu ihnen zu sagen: »Ihr Männer, was macht Ihr, daß Ihr Euch so herumschlagt? Bedenkt doch, daß Eure Weiber und Kinder umkommen müssen, wo Ihr nicht aufhört. Wollt Ihr Euch denn selbst vom Erdboden vertilgen?« (714)

The *woman* should not go to war but as far as possible preserve peace. So when the men around her fight with each other and the war gets violent, the *woman* should have the power to address them and say to them: ‘You *men*, what are you doing that you belabor each other about with blows in this way? Just remember that your wives and children are bound to die if you do not stop. Do you, then, want to be responsible for your own annihilation from the face of the earth?’ (Forster 401)

While Herder realizes that peacekeeping efforts do not necessarily produce a lasting peace, he nonetheless seizes on this account and offers his own ideas for peacekeeping in a series of seven *Gesinnungen* (dispositions).

These dispositions remain relevant today and serve as a compass for navigating the turbulent waters of national hostilities. Herder's letter once again emphasizes his penchant for peace: "Meine große Friedensfrau hat nur einen Namen: sie heißt allgemeine *Billigkeit*, *Menschlichkeit*, *thätige Vernunft*" (719; My great peace woman has only a single name: she is called *universal justice*, *humaneness*, *active reason*; Forster 404). The seven *Gesinnungen* Herder lays out point the way toward *Humanität*. They are as follows: *Horror of war*, *reduced respect for heroic glory*, *horror of false statecraft*, *purified patriotism*, *feeling of justice towards other nations*, *concerning presumptions in trade*, and *activity*. Perhaps the most straightforward of these dispositions is the horror of war. Here, Herder emphasizes that war is not only horrible in and of itself, but that its long-term effects are worse than the conflict itself. "Und das Gefolge des Krieges, schrecklicher als er selbst, sind Krankheiten, Lazarethe, Hunger, Pest, Raub, Gewaltthat, Verödung der Länder, Verwilderung der Gemüther, Zerstörung der Familien, Verderb der Sitten auf lange Geschlechter" (720; And in the train of war, more terrible than war itself, come diseases, military hospitals, starvation, plague, robbery, violence, desolation of lands, degeneration of minds into savagery, destruction of families, spoiling of ethics for long generations; Forster 404-405). As these passages show, Herder would never embrace or promote any kind of nationalism that would thrust a nation into armed conflict.

The call for *reduced respect for heroic glory* rejects the glorification of war and conquest in literature and culture. "Immer mehr muß sich die Gesinnung verbreiten, daß der ländererobernde *Heldengeist* nicht nur ein Würgengel der Menschheit sei, sondern auch in seinen Talenten lange nicht die Achtung und den Ruhm verdiene, die man ihm aus Tradition von Griechen, Römern und Barbaren her zollt" (721; The disposition must spread more and more that the land-conquering heroic spirit is not only an angel of death for humanity but also in its talents

does not remotely deserve the respect and glory that get paid to it due to tradition, from the Greeks, Romans, and barbarians on down; Forster 405). Undoubtedly, many countries view military personnel and military endeavors in a glorified light. Today, in the United States, the glorification of war can readily be seen in both Hollywood blockbuster films and news coverage of armed conflicts. Herder notes that such dispositions are propagated by those who benefit from militaristic endeavors. “Immer mehr muß sich die *falsche Staatskunst* entlarven, die den Ruhm eines Regenten und das Glück seiner Regierung in Erweiterung der Grenzen, in Erjagung oder Erhaschung fremder Provinzen, in vermehrte Einkünfte, schlaue Unterhandlungen, in willkürliche Macht, List und Betrug setzt“ (721; More and more there must be an unmasking of the *false statecraft* that places a regent’s glory and his government’s fortune in expansion of borders, in capturing or seizing foreign provinces, in increased income, sly negotiations, in arbitrary power, cunning, and deception; Forster 405). Herder’s third disposition, *horror of false statecraft*, anticipates autocratic expansion of power that allows heads of state to reign unchecked, often at the behest of monetary interests, a development that is evident in many contemporary nation-states.

The fourth disposition addresses ill-begotten nationalistic and patriotic sentiments akin to those found in the second disposition. Herder proposes a *geläuterter Patriotismus* (*purified patriotism*). “Der *Patriotismus* muß sich nothwendig immer mehr von Schlacken reinigen und läutern. Jede Nation muß es fühlen lernen, daß sie nicht im Auge Andrer, nicht im Munde der Nachwelt, sondern nur in sich, in sich selbst groß, schön, edel, reich, wohlgeordnet, thätig und glücklich werde, und daß sodann die fremde wie die späte Achtung ihr wie der Schatten dem Körper folge. Mit diesem Gefühl muß sich nothwendig Abscheu und Verachtung gegen jedes leere Auslaufen der Ihrigen in fremde Länder, gegen das nutzlose Einmischen in ausländische

Händel, gegen jede leere Nachäffung und Theilnehmung verbinden, die unser Geschäft, unsre Pflicht, unsre Ruhe und Wohlfahrt stören“ (722; *Patriotism* must necessarily more and more clean and purify itself of dross. Every nation must learn to feel that it becomes great, beautiful, noble, rich, well ordered, active, and happy, not in the eyes of others, not in the mouth of posterity, but only in itself, in its own self; and that both foreign and late respect then follows it as the shadow follows the body. With this feeling there is necessarily bound up horror and contempt for every empty invasion of your people into foreign lands, for useless interference in foreign quarrels, for every empty aping and participation that disturbs our business, our duty, our peace and welfare; Forster 406). Here, Herder also conveys a sense of sympathy towards other nations. The peace and sanctity of one's own nation must accommodate the peace and sanctity of others. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of Herder's culturally informed sense of nationalism; sympathy is at the core of *Humanität*.

The last two dispositions concern how nations should conduct trade with one another and how they can guard against hostility toward other nations. For the sake of brevity, I will forgo including textual examples, but the doctrines laid out in them follow the same core principles Herder describes throughout the *Briefe*: aversion to war and state-sanctioned violence and the fostering of sympathy towards all nations and peoples.

My survey of Herder's writings has hopefully led to a nuanced understanding of his philosophies and our understanding of contemporary manifestations of nationalism. Following Herder's initial thoughts on language and his anthropological assessment of history, we ultimately come to his political writings, which attempt to convey an egalitarian, humanistic vision of how nations can coexist peacefully. I have described this vision as Herder's cultural nationalism and have argued that it is at odds with competing contemporary imaginings of the

nation. Unlike Herder's liberal, egalitarian program of *Humanität*, nationalism today is predominantly characterized by xenophobic and hostile tendencies. This xenophobia, accompanied by a toxic hue of exceptionalism, has been propagated by heads of state to maintain the hegemonic status quo. Today's xenophobic and aggressive nationalism is propped up by spurious appeals to collective values, traditionally instilled. Herder, in many ways, anticipates these perversions of power and manipulation and sought to counter them via an education guided by the principles of *Humanität*. Our elected officials promise us a brighter future in the name of supposedly democratic values; these values, however, lose all meaning when governments engage in armed conflicts outside of their sovereign borders. As van der Laan notes in their article "Johann Gottfried Herder on War and Peace,"

Throughout history, Herder points out, a magnificent phantom (*Glanzphantom*) has appeared which gives the illusion of efforts on behalf of a future better republic, the best form of the state, even of all states or forms of government. [...] Here, we recognize any number of justifications for war and military intervention advanced before, during, and since Herder's time. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have certainly heard such explanations and from governments as radically different as Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the United States of America.

While Herder acknowledges that humanity is a long way from achieving even a semblance of *Humanität*, he insists that we must continue to aspire to this goal. Herder's concept of nationalism is first and foremost rooted in sympathy. A lack of sympathy, a lack of communal understanding, is antithetical to Herder's true patriotism. "Dagegen muß jede Nation allgemach es unangenehm empfinden, wenn eine andre Nation beschimpft und beleidigt wird; es muß allmählig ein *gemeines Gefühl* erwachen, daß jede sich an die Stelle jeder andern fühle. [...] Wächst dies Gefühl, so wird unvermerkt eine *Allianz aller gebildeten Nationen* gegen jede einzelne anmaßende Macht" (723; On the other hand, every nation must gradually come to feel it as unpleasant when another nation gets disparaged and abused; there must gradually awaken a

*common feeling* so that every nation feels itself into the positions of every other one. [...] If this feeling grows, then there will arise imperceptibly an *alliance of all cultivated* nations against every individual presumptuous power). Sadly, however, more often than not, nations are incapable of living up to Herder's ideals and fail to avoid conflict and war. And while Herder was aware of this, he remained a pacifist at heart and refused to legitimize violence. For some of Herder's contemporaries, however, the question of violence would turn out to become a major preoccupation. Addressing similar quandaries' that Herder grappled with, Friedrich Schiller too sought to synthesize a moral philosophy in the face of political oppression and tyranny.

## Chapter 2: Schiller's Aesthetic Revolution

Following an analysis of culturally and linguistically informed formations of identity and nation (*natio*), I now turn to the works of German poet, playwright, and philosopher, Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), whose literary oeuvre focuses on constructs of patriotism, freedom, and rebellion as they pertain to Enlightenment discourse. Many of Schiller's historical dramas center on oppression and ensuing struggles for freedom. Patriotism is often the motivating factor that unites a group or *Volk* against forces of oppression and tyranny, and indeed I contend that Schiller's ideation of nation stands in vehement opposition to authoritarianism. These core concepts form the nexus of Schiller's *Rebellionskonzept* (concept of rebellion), which closely links freedom to happiness (*Freude, Glückseligkeit*) as part of a larger commitment to consider the importance of human emotion in political and social endeavors. In the following, I examine how Schiller's philosophic essays and historical dramas contributed to his concept of a German nation, expressive of his anti-authoritarian inclinations. To explore these concepts, I will engage with his *Aesthetical Letters* (*Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, 1795), which connect Schiller's notion of aesthetics to pragmatic applications via an educational experience of theater. The essence of the theater is laid out in "Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet" (The Theater Considered as a Moral Institution, 1784). Where the *Aesthetical Letters* outline Schiller's theory, the theater represents praxis. Following a discussion of Schiller's philosophical theories, I turn to the political concept of *Verfassungspatriotismus* (first coined by Dolf Sternberger in 1970 and further synthesized by Jürgen Habermas) and explore its significance to Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* (1804). I preface these main points with a brief discussion and contextualization of formative moments in Schiller's upbringing and path as a philosopher and writer.

Born in Marbach am Neckar in 1759, Schiller was the son of Johann Kaspar Schiller (1723-1796) and Elisabetha Dorothea Kodweiß (1732-1802). Johann Kaspar Schiller served as field medic under Duke Karl Eugen (1773-1793)—Friedrich Schiller would follow in his father's footsteps also serving as a field medic under the tutelage of Karl Eugen. Eventually, Schiller would sideline his studies at the Karlsschule (medicine and law) in favor of more humanistic pursuits. Schiller's departure from the Karlsschule was due in part to the Duke of Württemberg's overbearing censorship and oppressive rule. Schiller had no other recourse than to flee to pursue his interests. Chief among these pursuits were his philosophical explorations into the realm of aesthetics, its connection to morality, and his lifelong commitment to expressions of freedom in political and social realms.

Schiller is perhaps best known for his historical dramas, which grapple with the dialectic of tyranny and rebellion, a preoccupation that spans his entire literary oeuvre. A contemporary of Herder's, Schiller too is regarded as a representative of the *Sturm and Drang* movement. As such, he was keen on addressing the failures and overreaches of governance; he was particularly critical of a purely rationalistic, mechanical approach to governing and evaluating individual needs. Like Herder, Schiller saw a dire need to infuse the literary and cultural sphere with greater emotional depth. Both saw the great importance of empathy in addressing social ailments. Schiller sought to establish an institution that would serve to educate and enlighten the masses and identified the theater as the artistic medium par excellence for such an undertaking. In this vein, Schiller's drama *Wilhelm Tell* exemplifies both his political and aesthetic theories. I find it therefore a worthwhile endeavor to explore how *Wilhelm Tell* also illuminates Schiller's idea of nation.

I analyze Schiller's historical drama *Wilhelm Tell* (1804) to shed light on the links between Enlightenment discourse, Schiller's aesthetic philosophies, and notions of patriotism. Although *Wilhelm Tell* was the last play Schiller wrote, the patriotic sentiments expressed in this play speak to a lifelong endeavor to combat tyranny and awaken a sense of sentimentality within the *Volk*. Such themes are already visible in his earlier works. As Lydia Moland points out in her entry on Schiller in the "Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy," "The revolutionary mood of the age, combined with his deep objections to the Duke's tyrannical rule, prompted a passion for freedom already evident in his first play, *The Robbers* [*Die Räuber*], whose protagonists defy social norms at the expense of their own lives."<sup>27</sup> Challenging the status quo is part and parcel of Schiller's patriotism, as expressed throughout his literary oeuvre. Indeed, defying authority, particularly as it pertains to bodies of governance, is a prevalent theme throughout the long 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution were transformative events. As Ian Davidson points out in his book *The French Revolution: From Enlightenment to Tyranny*,

In theory, a revolution like the French one could have happened anywhere in Europe, because Europe was ripe for it. [...] Most peoples in most of Europe lived under monarchies of one kind or another, most of which were more or less despotic. [...] By the last half of the eighteenth century, the repressive regimes of Europe had outlived their operational usefulness or their political acceptability. As a result, from 1760, subject peoples had regularly erupted in protests against their rulers, in Hungary, in Milan, in Sweden, in Belgium and in Geneva, as well as in France itself. (6)

In a fractured and splintered Germany, movements to fight despotism had an enormous impact on the desire of Germans to form a nation and develop a national identity. Many German liberals initially saw great promise in the French Revolution, as it was a direct challenge to the

---

<sup>27</sup> Moland, Lydia L., "Friedrich Schiller," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/schiller/> (Accessed on 4/30/2024).

monarchy, and believed that the moment for a new political order had come. As Moland has pointed out, “the revolutionary mood of the age” played an enormous role in how Schiller conceptualized the betterment of humankind and the path towards a free, egalitarian society rooted in brotherly love.

Schiller’s notion of the nation is guided, first and foremost, by his conceptualization of freedom as an aesthetic and moral principle, as expounded in his *Aesthetical Letters*. Here, as Simon Richter notes in the introduction to *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*, “Schiller attempts to address the fundamental dilemma of his times: As tyrannies and monarchies are threatened and collapse under the violent pressure of democratic insurgency, how do we reconcile law and desire?” (17). Conflicts between law and desire, along with a struggle for freedom, also inform Schiller’s historical dramas. Schiller’s last historical drama, *Wilhelm Tell* (1804), is particularly relevant in this context. A retelling of the 14th-century Swiss struggle against the Austrian house of Habsburg, *Wilhelm Tell* illustrates how nationalistic sentiments are forged in the face of imperialistic oppression.

Schiller’s dramas, notably *Wilhelm Tell*, contribute to an imagining of the German nation that aligns with the humanistic and universal goals of the Enlightenment. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that Schiller’s concept of the nation, much like Herder, differs from our own. Around 1800, the term “nation” was not understood as it is in contemporary parlance but signified a group of people with common linguistic characteristics. Anderson’s work on the nation and nationalism as it pertains to a sense of an “imagined community” is again relevant in this context. Schiller envisioned a German “nation” held together by a constitution. I argue that the patriotic sentiments evoked throughout *Wilhelm Tell* and Schiller’s other historical dramas are best captured by German political theorist Dolf Sternberger’s (1907-1989) notion of

*Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism). As Igor Primoratz and Aleskandar Pakovic explain in *On the Origins of Constitutional Patriotism*, *Verfassungspatriotismus* is “morally legitimate and indeed virtuous [...] it is not exclusive, but rather compatible with a degree of concern for all human beings” (Müller 2). Before I elucidate these points in *Wilhelm Tell*, I will examine Schiller’s philosophies and the circumstances under which he devised his theories of aesthetics and morality since they provide the foundation on which his notions of patriotism are built.

### Schiller’s Aesthetic and Moral Philosophies

Schiller’s foray into the philosophic realm started during his stay at the *Karlsschule*, whose curriculum emphasized philosophy and anthropology. Under the tutelage of Jakob Friedrich von Abel (1751-1829), Schiller developed his early ideas on ethics and morality, topics that would occupy him throughout his life. Beiser explains that “it was Abel who introduced him [Schiller] to Shakespeare, to the philosophers of the Scottish and French Enlightenment, to the aesthetic writings of Batteux, Home, Riedel, Lessing, and Winckelmann” (Beiser, 17). Schiller began to formulate key philosophical concepts that appear throughout his literary oeuvre. Of particular significance are his explorations of dualities that address the (over)rationality of Enlightenment discourse. He, like many others, including Herder, objected to hypertrophied notions of rationality and theorized the importance of emotions in the philosophical and literary sphere.

Themes of emotion versus rationality are already visible in Schiller’s dissertation, *Philosophie der Physiologie* (1779), written during his time in the *Karlsschule*. In it, Schiller investigates the connection between mind and body (mental and physical faculties). He describes a mediating sense [*Mittelkraft*] that facilitates a connection between internal and external forces. In essence, Schiller attempts to bring human emotional faculties into harmony with the purely

rational. Furthermore, Schiller engages with the era's growing concern for ethics and morality, while critically acknowledging its privileging of rationality over sentimentality. Such a purely logical approach fails to take individual differences into account and leads society, especially the upper classes who had access to higher education and were schooled in Enlightenment thought, to become cold, calculative, and self-interested. In contrast, Schiller argued that true ethical and moral conduct must arise from within the individual; it must be rooted in an autonomous decision and reflect a harmonious union of rationality and sensuousness. This is a common thread throughout Schiller's philosophical works, including *Über Anmuth und Würde* (On Grace and Dignity, 1793), which outlines Schiller's theory of beauty and freedom in bodily movements,

So viel leuchtet ein, daß sich weder der Wille bei der absichtlichen, noch der Affekt bei der sympathetischen Bewegung gegen die von ihm abhängende Natur als eine Gewalt verhalten dürfe, wenn sie ihm mit Schönheit gehorchen soll. Schon das allgemeine Gefühl der Menschen macht die Leichtigkeit zum Hauptcharakter der Grazie, und was angestrengt wird, kann niemals Leichtigkeit zeigen. Eben so leuchtet ein, daß auf der andern Seite die Natur sich gegen den Geist nicht als Gewalt verhalten dürfe, wenn ein schöner moralischer Ausdruck statt haben soll; denn wo die bloße Natur herrscht, da muß die Menschheit verschwinden.<sup>28</sup>

This much is evident, that neither the will in the intentional, nor the affect in the sympathetic movement, should behave as a force against the nature that depends on it, if it is to obey it with beauty. The general feeling of mankind already makes lightness the principal character of grace, and what is strained can never show lightness. It is just as evident that, on the other hand, nature must not behave as a force against the spirit if a beautiful moral expression is to take place; for where mere nature reigns, humanity must disappear.

This view contrasts with the philosophy of Kant, whose *Categorical Imperative* presumes that morality is, by and large, a purely "objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle

---

<sup>28</sup><https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/anmutwde/anmutwd2.html> (Accessed on 26 April 2025)

that we must follow despite any natural desires we may have to the contrary.”<sup>29</sup> For Schiller, however, love [*Liebe*] born out of an appreciation of beauty [*Schönheit*] plays a crucial role in countering humanity’s moral shortcomings.

Schiller’s moral philosophy informs his notions of love and beauty and his assessment of patriotism and a German nation. In response to commonly posed questions regarding morality and goodness, e.g., the question, “What is the vocation of man?”, Schiller highlights the importance of happiness [*Glückseligkeit*], which he considered a crucial component of the human experience. In this, Schiller was influenced by his study of the British sentimentalists, including Adam Ferguson (1723-1813), David Hume (1711-1776), Johann Joachim Spalding (1714-1804), and Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713).<sup>30</sup> Seeking to balance happiness and love with rationality and cognition, Schiller devised dichotomies based on the parameters of *Liebe* and *Weisheit*, *Anmut* and *Würde*. He then synthesized these dualities into his concept of virtue [*Tugend*], a central theme in his works, first introduced in a series of speeches he delivered at the *Karlsschule*.

In his early “Rede über die Frage: Gehört allzuviel Güte, Leutseeligkeit und grosse Freygebigkeit im engsten Verstande zur Tugend?” (Speech on the Question: Is Excessive Kindness, Sociability, and Great Generosity in the Narrowest Sense Part of Virtue?, 1779), Schiller states, “Allzugroße Güte und Leutseeligkeit ist nicht Nachahmung Gottes. Nicht Tugend. Sie ist mit Liebe, aber nicht mit Weißheit im Bund. Tugend ist das harmonische Band

---

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, Robert and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/> (Accessed on 6/25/2024).

<sup>30</sup> Beiser notes, “this question was central to German moral philosophy in the late eighteenth century, and it was given great popularity through J. J. Spalding’s famous 1748 *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. The vocation of man was a religious formulation for an even more basic question that had dominated classical and medieval ethics: ‘What is the highest good?’” (19).

von Liebe und Weisheit” (NA 20, 6; Excessive kindness and affability is not imitation of God. Not virtue. It is allied with love, but not with wisdom. Virtue is the harmonious bond of love and wisdom). In this, Schiller warns of potential imbalances in a duality. Excessive kindness unchecked by reason is not sustainable, just as logic and reason must be tempered by love. Schiller’s notion of virtue requires both mind and heart. As Beiser notes,

It is indeed in his account of virtue that we can determine Schiller’s great debt to the British sentimentalists, who had always insisted on the priority of feeling over reason in determining our moral obligations. The theme of the first speech is that virtue consists in both love and wisdom, and that neither of these alone is sufficient for it. (21)

Schiller developed the foundations of his moral philosophy during his time at the Karlsschule, and although this philosophy underwent changes during his life, the emphasis on a synthesis of dualities remained fundamental to his moral and aesthetic inquiries and played a crucial role in his dramas.

While the synthesis of dualities is crucial to Schiller’s thought, his philosophic outlook was also influenced by Greek antiquity. And Schiller was not alone in his reverence for ancient Greece. Herder, Goethe, and Wilhelm von Humboldt are but a few of Schiller’s contemporaries who shared his interest in Greek literature and culture—all of whom were certainly influenced by their predecessor Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Indeed, a collective fascination with Greek antiquity defines the literary epoch of Weimar Classicism. Many German writers and philosophers, who sought to foster a sense of national cohesion via a literary and cultural rejuvenation, looked to Greek antiquity as the model *par excellence*. Charles A. Grair notes,

Weimar Classicism can be said to begin in 1786 when Goethe places his Iphigenie on the rocky shores of Tauris [...] The search for Greece, for a distant poetic homeland where one could find the beauty, harmony, and fulfillment lacking in the modern world, captivated an entire generation. Not only Goethe and Schiller, but their contemporaries,

from Lessing, Klopstock (1724-1803), and Wieland to the younger Jena Romantics shared the search for Iphigenie's Greece. (63)

The harmony identified with this ancient civilization resonated with Schiller. In Schiller's mind, the aesthetics of ancient Greek society championed an ideal of beauty in freedom that Schiller wished to import to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Schiller believed that the Greeks united reason and emotion and thus embodied a harmonious wholeness that Schiller captured in the concept of the *schöne Seele* [beautiful soul], which he developed in his *Ästhetische Briefe*. As with Herder, antiquity offers a starting point from which to conceptualize an ideal form of "German" culture and concomitantly a nation. Herder proposes a literary rejuvenation undergirded by his concept of *Humanität*. Similarly, Wilhelm von Humboldt successfully rejuvenated German educational institutions while Schiller offered thoughts on the betterment of humanity. In his *Ästhetische Erziehung*, Schiller sought to educate a burgeoning middle class as well as guide and instruct those in positions of power. The *Ästhetische Erziehung* marks the culmination of Schiller's moral philosophy, even if, much like Herder's notion of *Humanität*, it lacks clearly defined goals and demands a continuous striving for betterment. Both Schiller and Herder were aware that humankind had yet to achieve the moral and aesthetic ideals laid out in the notion of *Humanität* and the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. For Schiller, a realization of these ideals would pave the way for the *Menschenrepublik*, another key concept of his philosophy, which I will examine in connection with *Wilhelm Tell* and as an extension of a *geläuterter Patriotismus*. Before delving into how Schiller's theories are expressed in his retelling of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century struggle for Swiss independence, which plays a crucial role in his imagining of a German cultural nation, I will parse Schiller's early philosophy. In particular, I offer an analysis of a speech that Schiller delivered in Mannheim in 1784 and which relates to his dramatic works.

As a newly appointed member of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft*, Schiller delivered his inaugural speech, “Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet” (The Theater Considered as a Moral Institution). The essay, from which the speech was derived, was initially titled “Vom Wirken der Schaubühne auf das Volk” (On the Effect of the Theatre on the People), and was published in 1785 with the title, “Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?” (What can a good permanent theater actually achieve?). As the title hints, Schiller saw the theater as an ideal medium to educate and enlighten the *Volk*. Fairly accessible since literacy is not a pre-requisite, the theater can reach the widest audience with the greatest effect. The theater allows the observer to be present and witness an array of human experiences. Schiller believed that the potential morality imparted by this experience would be far more effective than simply adhering to written doctrine or laws. “So gewiß sichtbare Darstellung mächtiger wirkt, als todter Buchstabe und kalte Erzählung, so gewiß wirkt die Schaubühne tiefer und dauernder als Moral und Gesetze” (As surely as visible representation is more powerful than dead letters and cold narratives, as surely the stage has a deeper and more lasting effect than morality and laws).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in this speech, Schiller elaborates on what he deems to be the two chief, interconnected sources of morality: religion and law.

Derjenige, welcher zuerst die Bemerkung machte, daß eines Staats festeste Säule *Religion* sei—daß ohne sie die Gesetze selbst ihre Kraft verlieren, hat vielleicht, ohne es zu wollen oder zu wissen, die Schaubühne von ihrer edelsten Seite vertheidigt. Eben diese Unzulänglichkeit, die schwankende Eigenschaft der politischen Gesetze, welche dem Staat die Religion unentbehrlich macht, bestimmt auch den sittlichen Einfluß der Bühne.<sup>32</sup>

The person who first remarked that the most solid pillar of a state is religion—that without it the laws themselves lose their force—may have, without wanting or knowing it, defended the theater from its noblest side. Precisely this inadequacy, the fluctuating

---

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/anstalt/anstalt.html> (Accessed on 27 April 2025)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

nature of political laws, which makes religion indispensable to the state, also determines the moral influence of the stage.

Here, Schiller expounds on the duality of rational law and religion's emotional force, arguing that together they constitute the moral fiber of a community. Schiller sees in the theater a medium capable of bringing the two into harmony. He continues,

Religion wirkt im Ganzen mehr auf den sinnlichen Theil des Volks—sie wirkt vielleicht durch das Sinnliche allein so unfehlbar. Ihre Kraft ist dahin, wenn wir ihr dieses nehmen—und wodurch wirkt die Bühne? [...] Welche Verstärkung für Religion und Gesetze, wenn sie mit der Schaubühne in Bund treten, wo Anschauung und lebendige Gegenwart ist, wo Laster und Tugend, Glückseligkeit und Elend, Thorheit und Weisheit in tausend Gemälden faßlich und wahr an dem Menschen vorübergehen, wo die Vorsehung ihre Räthsel auflöst, ihren Knoten vor seinen Augen entwickelt, wo das menschliche Herz auf den Foltern der Leidenschaft seine leisesten Regungen beichtet, alle Larven fallen, alle Schminke verfliegt und die Wahrheit unbestechlich wie Rhadamanthus Gericht hält.<sup>33</sup>

Religion, on the whole, has a stronger effect on the sensual part of the people—perhaps it works so infallibly through the sensual alone. Its power is gone if we take this away from it—and what does the stage do? [...] What reinforcement for religion and laws when they enter into an alliance with the stage, where there is intuition and living presence, where vice and virtue, bliss and misery, folly and wisdom pass before man in a thousand paintings, comprehensible and true, where providence unravels its riddles, resolves its knot before his eyes, where the human heart confesses its slightest impulses under the tortures of passion, all masks fall, all make-up disappears and truth holds court incorruptibly like Rhadamanthus.

Schiller views the theater as potentially the most effective artistic medium in imparting a sense of enlightened morality, not only because it paints vivid pictures, but also because it is enjoyed by a large swaths of people, including those in the ruling class. Schiller's theater has the capacity to educate both the masses and those in power, whereas his theoretical works, such as the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, are primarily addressed to the ruling class.

While Herder proposed cultivating a German cultural nation via a literary renaissance, Schiller sought to turn the theater into a national institution that fosters patriotic sentiments, a

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

genuine sympathy and concern for those around you, guided by moral philosophical doctrines.

Such an institution would offer a large sphere of influence to foster the formation of a nation.

Schiller understood the importance of literature and art in building a collective communal imagining.

Sogar Industrie und Erfindungsgeist könnten und würden vor dem Schauplatz Feuer fangen, wenn die Dichter es der Mühe werth hielten, Patrioten zu sein, und der Staat sich herablassen wollte, sie zu hören.

Unmöglich kann ich hier den großen Einfluß übergehen, den eine gute stehende Bühne auf den Geist der Nation haben würde. Nationalgeist eines Volks nenne ich die Aehnlichkeit und Uebereinstimmung seiner Meinungen und Neigungen bei Gegenständen, worüber eine andere Nation anders meint und empfindet. Nur der Schaubühne ist es möglich, diese Uebereinstimmung in einem hohen Grad zu bewirken, weil sie das ganze Gebiet des menschlichen Wissens durchwandert, alle Situationen des Lebens erschöpft und in alle Winkel des Herzens hinunter leuchtet; weil sie alle Stände und Klassen in sich vereinigt und den gebahntesten Weg zum Verstand und zum Herzen hat.<sup>34</sup>

Even industry and the spirit of invention could and would catch fire from the theater if the poets thought it worth their while to be patriots and the state would deign to hear them.

It is impossible for me to ignore here the great influence that a good standing stage would have on the spirit of the nation. I call the national spirit of a people the similarity and agreement of its opinions and inclinations on matters about which another nation thinks and feels differently. Only the stage is capable of bringing about this agreement to a high degree, because it travels through the entire field of human knowledge, exhausts all situations in life and shines down into every corner of the heart; because it unites all estates and classes and has the clearest path to the mind and the heart.

By contrasting the inclinations and opinions of a *Volk* with those of another, Schiller is loosely defining the parameters of a nation, and, although he does not state it explicitly in the above passage, the theater as a patriotic institution implies cultural/linguistic commonalities. Here, the nation is not defined politically by territories, but rather encompasses cultural spheres of influence. Of particular importance is the sentiment that the theater as a patriotic institution can

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

unite all estates and classes, a notion that plays an important role in my analysis of *Wilhelm Tell*. Schiller's *Schaubühne* contains early formations of his later philosophies concerning the function of art, morality, and the cultivation of the individual, all of which contribute to his conceptualization of a German nation. With *Schaubühne* in mind, I will now examine Schiller's philosophic foray into aesthetics and its role in the *Bildung* of the individual as presented in *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*.

Like most writers and philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including Herder and Fichte, Schiller addresses the theories put forth by the philosophic titan of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. Schiller is often criticized for turning away from political pursuits post-French Revolution, in favor of a theory of aesthetics, parsing Kant's works for an object theory of beauty. As many scholars have attested, however, Schiller's turn to Kantian philosophy did not constitute a flight from political pursuits but rather a continuation, as Schiller further developed his theories of statecraft and the challenges facing humanity in modernity. Let us first consider in depth the significance of Kant's philosophy for Schiller's theories of aesthetics and his *Ästhetische Erziehung*.

Schiller first engaged with Kantian philosophy in the early 1790s as he grappled with the philosophical implications of moral freedom. Beiser notes,

In the early 1780s Schiller had virtually abandoned his guiding faith in providence, his belief in a divine creation and governed universe. [...] It was the basis for his theory of the highest good, and the premise behind two of his cardinal doctrines; that here is a harmony between self-interest and morality, and that there is a connection between pleasure and perfection. (42)

Schiller's search for objective criteria of aesthetics ultimately led him to Kant's work, predominantly his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Schiller felt compelled to reevaluate Kant's critiques in light of the failure of the French Revolution. Unlike Kant, Schiller did not perceive

humanity's sensuous nature as a fault but rather saw the potentiality for good. He attributes the violent development of the French Revolution to an imbalance of reason and emotion, which results in a lack of moral maturity. He warns against the unfettered emotional reaction of the masses.

In den niedern und zahlreichern Klassen stellen sich uns rohe, gesetzlose Triebe dar, die sich nach aufgelöstem Band der bürgerlichen Ordnung entfesseln und mit unlenksamer Wuth zu ihrer thierischen Befriedigung eilen. [...] Auf der andern Seite geben uns die zivilisierten Klassen den noch widrigern Anblick der Schlawheit und einer Depravation des Charakters, die desto mehr empört, weil die Kultur selbst ihre Quelle ist. Ich erinnere mich nicht mehr, welcher alte oder neue Philosoph die Bemerkung machte, daß das Edlere in seiner Zerstörung das Abscheulichere sei; aber man wird sie auch im Moralischen wahr finden. (*Ästhetische Erziehung*, 12-13)<sup>35</sup>

In the lower and more numerous classes we are presented with raw, lawless impulses which, after the bonds of civil order have been dissolved, are unleashed and rush with uncontrollable fury to their animalistic satisfaction. [...] On the other hand, the civilized classes give us the even more unpleasant sight of laxity and depravation of character, which is all the more outrageous because culture itself is its source. I no longer remember which philosopher, old or new, made the remark that that which is more noble is more hideous in its destruction; but you will also find it true in moral terms.

Moland offers an explanation for the imbalance of mind and heart: “Among the culprits to be blamed for this condition are the Enlightenment’s over-emphasis on reason and its eschewing of sentiment—factors that Schiller suggests led to the French Revolution’s barbaric excesses.”<sup>36</sup>

This link between violence, the dissolution of civil bonds, and hypertrophied rationality prompted Schiller to develop his theories of morality and freedom. He did so by reflecting on the differences between his and Kant’s philosophies, which made “him more self-conscious and self-confident in his own writing” (Beiser, 42). What began as an exploration of definable parameters of beauty evolved into a theory of morality. As Beiser explains, “[T]he term ‘aesthetic writings’ is somewhat misleading, because Schiller’s later philosophic essays go far beyond the merely

---

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/aesterz/aesterz2.html> (Accessed on 27 April 2025)

<sup>36</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=schiller> (Accessed on 12 March 2024)

aesthetic: they also deeply concern, and do not merely touch upon, issues in education, ethics and politics” (42). Clearly, Schiller did not “flee” from politics; rather, he developed his own theories concerning the connection between aesthetics, morality, and politics. This endeavor culminated in a program of aesthetic education, as expounded in his seminal work *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795).

Schiller’s critical engagement with Kant’s critiques forms the premise of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, Simon Richter notes.

Schiller carries the idea of aesthetic autonomy further in *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. In his terms, beauty as a “living form” connotes “freedom in appearance,” the apparent self-determination of a work of art which allows it to transcend any subjugation to external forces. In this way, true art represents a realm of freedom or play, a holistic experience that harmonizes the sensual and intellectual desires. The classical ideal of human wholeness is thus realized as an aesthetic experience. (78)

This notion is visible in Schiller’s first letter where he alludes to the intimate link between reason and emotion.<sup>37</sup>

Sie wollen mir also vergönnen, Ihnen die Resultate meiner Untersuchungen *über das Schöne und die Kunst* in einer Reihe von Briefen vorzulegen. Lebhaft empfinde ich das Gewicht, aber auch den Reiz und die Würde dieser Unternehmung. Ich werde von einem Gegenstande sprechen, der mit dem besten Theil unserer Glückseligkeit in einer unmittelbaren und mit dem moralischen Adel der menschlichen Natur in keiner sehr entfernten Verbindung steht. Ich werde die Sache der Schönheit vor einem Herzen führen, das ihre ganze Macht empfindet und ausübt und bei einer Untersuchung, wo man eben so oft genöthigt ist, sich auf Gefühle als auf Grundsätze zu berufen, den schwersten Theil meines Geschäfts auf sich nehmen wird.<sup>38</sup>

You have kindly allowed me to present to you the results of my investigations into beauty and art in a series of letters. I vividly sense the weight, but also the appeal and dignity of this undertaking. I will speak on a matter which stands in a direct connection with the best part of our happiness, and in no very remote connection with the moral nobility of

---

<sup>37</sup> Originally, the letters were to build on the so called “Augustenburger Briefe” (1793), addressed to Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg (1765-1814), which Schiller wrote to thank his benefactor. The objective seems clear, however. Schiller seeks to educate and enlighten those who hold power as well as those who live under established structures of power.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/aesterz/aesterz.html> (Accessed on 27 April 2025)

human nature. I shall plead the cause of the beautiful before a heart that feels and exercises its full power, and which will take upon itself the most difficult part of my task in an investigation where one is compelled to appeal as frequently to feelings as to principles.

Here, Schiller dedicates his aesthetic philosophies to a member of the ruling class and appeals to his sensibilities with a plea for sympathy and understanding. In doing so, he seeks to affect a spiritual revolution from the top down and the bottom up. The transformation he envisions relies on a change from within, to be facilitated in part by an aesthetic education. William F. Wertz, Jr. states in “A Reader’s Guide to Letters on the Aesthetical,”

For Schiller, a human being who has achieved such harmony, by transforming his selfish, infantile erotic emotions into agape of truth, justice, and beauty, is a beautiful soul. Moreover, since only such a person is truly free, durable political freedom can only be achieved by deliberately fostering such an aesthetical education of man’s emotions among the population. (81)

Ultimately, Schiller’s aesthetic education paves the way for political freedom.

Starting from the fourth letter, one can glean a sense of the political and pragmatic attitudes Schiller wishes to instill. The synthesis, or harmony, of human drives [*Triebe*] will culminate in a state of political freedom. Such a synthesis unites two drives that act in opposition to each other and whose excesses afflict humanity in different ways: Too much sensuousness leads to impulsive savagery; too much reason, or mere cognition, leads to barbarity.

For Schiller, an appreciation and understanding of art can temper destructive drives and ultimately give rise to a fully formed character [*Totalität des Charakters*]. Such a totality is a necessary condition of political freedom. Schiller continues in the fourth letter,

Wenn also die Vernunft in die physische Gesellschaft ihre moralische Einheit bringt, so darf sie die Mannigfaltigkeit der Natur nicht verletzen. Wenn die Natur in dem moralischen Bau der Gesellschaft ihre Mannigfaltigkeit zu behaupten strebt, so darf der moralischen Einheit dadurch kein Abbruch geschehen; gleich weit von Einförmigkeit und Verwirrung ruht die siegende Form. *Totalität* des Charakters muß also bei dem Volke

gefunden werden, welches fähig und würdig sein soll, den Staat der Noth mit dem Staat der Freiheit zu vertauschen.<sup>39</sup>

When reason brings its moral unity into physical society, it must not injure the diversity of nature. When nature strives to assert its diversity in the moral construct of society, it must not truncate moral unity; the victorious form rests equally far from uniformity and confusion. Totality of character must therefore be found in the people who should be able and worthy to exchange the state of need for the state of freedom.

The whole scope of this totality is further developed throughout the *Ästhetische Erziehung* with the conclusion that humanity is not yet capable of achieving such a harmonious condition, which is accessible only through a process of constant striving. Schiller states in the fifth letter,

Ist es dieser Charakter, den uns das jetzige Zeitalter, den die gegenwärtigen Ereignisse zeigen? Ich richte meine Aufmerksamkeit sogleich auf den hervorstechendsten Gegenstand in diesem weitläufigen Gemälde. [...]

Das Gebäude des Naturstaates wankt, seine mürben Fundamente weichen, und eine physische Möglichkeit scheint gegeben, das Gesetz auf den Thron zu stellen, den Menschen endlich als Selbstzweck zu ehren und wahre Freiheit zur Grundlage der politischen Verbindung zu machen. Vergebliche Hoffnung! Die moralische Möglichkeit fehlt, und der freigebige Augenblick findet ein unempfindliches Geschlecht.<sup>40</sup>

Is it this character that the current age, that the current events show us? I immediately turn my attention to the most prominent object in this sprawling painting. [...]

The edifice of the natural state is shaking, its crumbling foundations give way, and a physical possibility appears to be given, to place law upon the throne, to honor finally the human being as an end in itself, and to make true freedom the foundation of political connection. Futile hope! The moral possibility is missing, and the generous moment finds an unreceptive generation.

Schiller partly considers this failure to seize the moment a product of the social conditions into which people are born. The lower classes succumb to base, animalistic drives as the bonds of society collapse. The upper and ruling classes, indoctrinated by the hollow maxims of the Enlightenment, lack the capacity for empathy; Schiller finds the latter more abhorrent [*abscheulich*]. Throughout his dramas, his despotic characters embody a severe lack of empathy

---

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/aesterz/aesterz.html> (Accessed on 27 March 2025)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

and emotional responsiveness. The overabundance of a predominantly rational state of mind leads to cold indifference to the plight of others. Moreover, this state of mind can mutate into a depraved form of chauvinism, selfishness, and self-indulgence.

For those in positions of power, ego takes over. This is the case for the villain Geßler in *Wilhelm Tell*. Schiller's tyrants exemplify what happens when humanity is stripped of emotion, when the ego suppresses all fellow feeling: "Mitten im Schoße der raffiniertesten Geselligkeit hat der Egoism sein System gegründet, und ohne ein geselliges Herz mit herauszubringen, erfahren wir alle Ansteckungen und alle Drangsale der Gesellschaft" (Schiller, *Asthetische Erziehung*; Amid the most sophisticated sociability, egoism established its system, and without bringing out a genial heart, we experience all the contagions and afflictions of society).<sup>41</sup>

In his evaluation of the contemporary conditions of humanity, Schiller even develops a sort of proto-Marxist critique of the material conditions brought about by the Enlightenment. In describing the vocation of man under such conditions, Schiller states in the sixth letter,

Auseinandergerissen wurden jetzt der Staat und die Kirche, die Gesetze und die Sitten; der Genuß wurde von der Arbeit, das Mittel vom Zweck, die Anstrengung von der Belohnung geschieden. Ewig nur an ein einzelnes kleines Bruchstück des Ganzen gefesselt, bildet sich der Mensch selbst nur als Bruchstück aus; ewig nur das eintönige Geräusch des Rades, das er umtreibt, im Ohre, entwickelt er nie die Harmonie seines Wesens, und anstatt die Menschheit in seiner Natur auszuprägen, wird er bloß zu einem Abdruck seines Geschäfts, seiner Wissenschaft.<sup>42</sup>

Torn apart were now state and church, law and customs; enjoyment was separated from work, means from ends, effort from reward. Forever chained to only a single small fragment of the whole, man forms himself only as a fragment; forever only the monotonous noise of the wheel, that he turns, in his ear, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of shaping humanity in his nature, he becomes merely an imprint of his vocation, his science.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Having identified the failures of humanity in its current condition, Schiller turns towards his vision of an aesthetic education, which he believes has the potential to transform current conditions.

When considering the polar afflictions of man as described by Schiller—*Wilder* or *Barbar*—art and beauty function as conduits to reestablish harmony. A calming effect serves to elevate the “*Wilder*”: “Sie [die Schönheit] wird *erstlich*, als ruhige Form, das wilde Leben besänftigen und von Empfindungen zu Gedanken den Übergang bahnen” (*Ästhetische Erziehung*; Beauty will firstly, as a calming form, soften the savage life and prepare the transition from feelings to thoughts).<sup>43</sup> In the case of the *Barbar*, the purely rational condition must be tempered by a refinement of the senses; “sie wird *zweitens*, als lebendes Bild, die abgezogene Form mit sinnlicher Kraft ausrüsten, den Begriff zur Anschauung und das Gesetz zum Gefühl zurückführen” (it [beauty] will secondly, as a living image, equip the abstracted form with sensuous power, leading concept back towards appearance and the law back towards feeling).<sup>44</sup> Thus, the individual achieves an equilibrium that offers respite from afflictive states of mind. These sentiments echo those espoused in *Schaubühne* and shed light on Schiller’s notion of patriotism in *Wilhelm Tell*, as will be shown below. Having established the role of beauty in art—or, as Schiller would put it, the effect and function of freedom in appearance—as presented throughout the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, I now turn to another crucial concept in the letters that pertains to the larger nexus of Schiller’s theories concerning political engagement and revolution: the beautiful soul.

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The synthesis of sensuous drives [*Stofftriebe*] and rational drives [*Formtriebe*] brings about a third condition, in which the once separate drives act in harmony to produce the play drive [*Spieltrieb*]. In this state, individuals live in aesthetic liberation, embodying the *Schönheit* that has affected them. Schiller calls a person who has reached such a state of freedom a “*schöne Seele*” (beautiful soul). He attributes this state to the ancient Greeks.

According to Schiller, the ideal conditions that produce such an aesthetic state were present in antiquity. Much like Herder, Schiller offered a highly idealized vision of ancient Greek society, casting the Greeks as an exemplary culture. He considered Greek artistic endeavors products of the aesthetic freedom of society.<sup>45</sup> As Wertz notes, the Greeks were able to engage in culture “without sacrificing the human heart. [...] the senses and the mind were not rigidly separated. ‘As high reason also climbed, so it yet always drew matter lovingly after it ...’ Thus for the Greeks, reason does not mutilate nature, as is the case with the Kantian categorical imperative” (87). Even so, for both Schiller and Herder, mere imitation of the Greeks will not do. It is not possible to return to “Arcadia”; rather, one must “reestablish the simplicity experienced by the Greeks by creating a future Elysium by means of a ‘higher art,’” an aesthetic state (Wertz, 88). Schiller posits that this can be achieved by balancing duty and inclination.

Wertz’ remarks concerning Kant point toward human inclinations and simultaneously highlight an important distinction between Schiller’s and Kant’s approaches to the nexus of aesthetics and morality. For Kant, mankind must curb its natural impulses, since such control will allow for a rational implementation of law. Schiller, by contrast, contends that the mere suppression of natural impulses [*Stofftriebe*] does not engender a healthy morality; indeed, more

---

<sup>45</sup> I contend that this notion pertains to the ancient Greek’s cultural and artistic productions and not the general freedoms (or lack thereof) in their society, e.g., regarding slavery and women’s rights.

often than not, it ultimately leads to barbarity. What is needed then is the synthesis of man's nature with a higher order of thought. Neither one must be suppressed by the other; they must act in harmony. For Schiller, it follows that no free action is truly free if it is done out of a sense of moral obligation. Fulfilling one's duty out of a sense of obligation is not the desired outcome; one must instead perform one's duty with love and joy.

Indeed, love and joy are crucial themes in Schiller's works. They are at the very heart of a force that heals and mends rifts. In Schiller's poem, "Die Bürgschaft" (1798/99), a tyrant witnesses how a man returns to captivity to save his friend even though he is condemned to be executed for attempted regicide. Had he not returned, his friend would have been executed in his stead. The tyrant is so moved by the man's seemingly irrational action that he, in turn, having felt true agapeic love, spares both their lives and seeks to join them in their joyous communion.

Drauf spricht er: »Es ist euch gelungen,  
Ihr habt das Herz mir bezwungen;  
Und die Treue, sie ist doch kein leerer Wahn –  
So nehmet auch mich zum Genossen an:  
Ich sei, gewährt mir die Bitte,  
In eurem Bunde der dritte!«<sup>46</sup>

Upon that he spoke: "In that you are felicitous,  
You have conquered my heart;  
And loyalty, it is no empty delusion –  
So take me on also as a comrade:  
I am, grant me the request,  
In your bond the third!"

The friend returns not out of a sense of obligation; rather his noble deed is portrayed as the act of a beautiful soul. The tyrant, who witnesses beauty as freedom in form, is so moved that his entire disposition is transformed. Reaching such a state of mind is the goal prescribed throughout the

---

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.friedrich-schiller-archiv.de/inhaltsangaben/schiller-die-buergschaft-inhaltsangabe-interpretation-und-quelle/> (Accessed on 23 April 2024)

*Ästhetische Erziehung*. In the following, I argue that such a harmony of duty and inclination is fundamental to conceptions of patriotism in Schiller's theories and historical dramas, including in *Wilhelm Tell*.

### Purified Patriotism in *Wilhelm Tell*

While nationalism stems from “*natio*” and pertains to linguistic communities, patriotism stems from “*patria*” or father, as in familial relation. When comparing nationalism with patriotism, there is typically an inclination to view the latter as the less harmful. Patriotism, understood as a love for one's nation/compatriots, while not inherently exclusionary can evoke similar hostile responses. According to Hans Peter Hermann, there is a dialectic at work in the concepts of patriotism and nationalism that originates in the Enlightenment and that erodes the division between a supposedly peaceful, enlightened patriotism (*friedlichen, aufklärerischen Patriotismus*), on the one hand, and a militant, aggressive, romantic nationalism (*militant-aggressiven, romantischen Nationalismus*) on the other (12). The assumed differences between these concepts resemble those between Herder's and Fichte's concepts of nationalism. Whereas Herder champions diversity in his notion of the nation, Fichte ultimately embraces exclusionary ethnic parameters. Both can be associated with aggressive and hostile tendencies. Patriotism, like nationalism, can effectively be propagandized by states to promote militant operations in foreign countries in the name of self-defense or freedom. As Caspar Hirschi points out,

Indeed, patriotic rhetoric is an excellent complement to imperialist policies, as it helps to cover their legal and moral dubiousness. According to its logic, a country's own aggression appears as self-defense and foreign self-defense as aggression, and thus a patriot is always in the right. (61)

Hirschi's association of patriotism with propaganda reflects a shift away from its meaning in eighteenth-century Germany. I am once again reminded of Hermann's claim that "Patriotismus und Nationalismus lassen sich nicht in eine geordnete historische Abfolge bringen, beide gehören auch systematisch zusammen als die zwei miteinander verbrüdereten Seiten neuzeitlicher Selbst- und Weltanschauung" (12; Patriotism and nationalism cannot be brought into an orderly historical sequence; both belong systematically together as the two fraternal sides of modern self-perception and worldview). While an ostensibly more innocent brand of patriotism has the potential to degenerate into the same maladies that afflict exclusionary brands of nationalism, I argue that such deformations are not inevitable; rather, it is crucial to examine how such slippage occurs. Taken at face value, there is nothing inherently wrong with loving the place where one was born. Problems arise when love of one's fatherland falls prey to chauvinistic, imperialist, and exclusionary rhetoric. Such toxic rhetoric seeks to alienate subaltern groups. To this end, I contend that Schiller, in *Wilhelm Tell*, portrays what political scientist Dolf Sternberger (1907-1989) originally termed a *Verfassungspatriotismus* [constitutional patriotism].

The term *Verfassungspatriotismus* while originally coined by Sternberger in 1979 has subsequently been further developed, most notably by Jürgen Habermas (1929-). According to Habermas, as cited by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Constitutional patriotism is the theory that in modern states the constitution can, and should, take the place of the nation as the focus of citizens' feelings of collective identity and the source of their civic solidarity."<sup>47</sup>

*Verfassungspatriotismus* aligns with my continued usage of the concept of the nation as an "imagined community." Habermas further elaborated on the term during the "historians dispute"

---

<sup>47</sup> Finlayson, James Gordon and Dafydd Huw Rees, "Jürgen Habermas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/habermas/> (Accessed on 5/23/2024).

of 1986. Habermas insists that any given community can imagine the nation outside the bounds of racial or ethnic parameters. Indeed, as nation states today are becoming more and more culturally diverse, the imagining of a cohesive nation must rely on markers outside of the racial and ethnic if it is to curb xenophobic tendencies. A constitution, along with a strong commitment to egalitarian principles, can provide such a marker as it ideally defines the rights and needs of all citizens. In the following, I argue that Schiller not only articulates a notion of *Verfassungspatriotismus*, but also enriches Habermas’s dry and measured definition with a infusion of heart and emotion. In this sense I view Schiller as a forerunner of this 20<sup>th</sup> century notion. Furthermore, I contend that Schiller embraces what Herder called a purified form of patriotism [*geläuterter Patriotismus*] that seeks recognition of others via its advocacy of love, joy, justice, and freedom. In his well-known “An die Freude” (“Ode to Joy”)—the text was subsequently set to music by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony—Schiller writes,

Alle Menschen werden Brüder,  
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.<sup>48</sup>

All people become brothers,  
Where your gentle wings rest.

Read in the context of *Schaubühne* and the *Ästhetische Erziehung*, Schiller’s historical drama *Wilhelm Tell* champions such a purified form of patriotism in its depiction of a *Verfassungspatriotismus*. Let us consider the term further.

While the notion of *Verfassungspatriotismus* is pertinent to modern nation-states and our contemporary understanding of nationalism, it is also applicable to 18th-century conceptualizations of the nation; *Wilhelm Tell*, in particular, presents an ideal republic based on a

---

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Programs/All-Together-A-Global-Ode-to-Joy/Texts-and-Translations/German> (Accessed on 23 April 2024)

form of constitutional patriotism. Indeed, as we shall see, the political action in *Wilhelm Tell* revolves around a discourse of law and rights. According to Habermas, such a *Verfassungspatriotismus* takes the place of ethnic and racial markers as driving impulses for political action.

The goal of constitutional patriotism is not, then, to *eliminate* national identity, but rather to *decentre* it and deprive it of its political function. In concrete terms, constitutional patriotism involves citizens developing critical and reflexive loyalties and attachments to their country's constitution and the moral principles encoded therein. What results from this is a collective identity with a political function.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, *Verfassungspatriotismus* is democratically attained via engagement in what Habermas calls the "public sphere." The key to the creation of a constitutional patriotism lies in the discourse of the public sphere.

Habermas defines the public sphere as the property of "neither the state, the economy, nor the family, the public sphere is where private individuals come together to communicate about matters of general concern. It is the location of the public use of reason and the place where 'public opinion' is formed."<sup>50</sup> This echoes Gelner's and Anderson's claim that the public sphere encompasses any engagement, proliferation, and consumption of media that contribute to and facilitate conversations about a common social imaging of the community or nation, such as occurred in 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Lesegesellschaften*. An emphasis on such conversations gained traction in scholarship on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries since the expansion of the literary marketplace and the concomitant proliferation of literature and newspapers combined with an increasingly literate and socially mobile middle class allowed such communal imaginings to flourish. It follows that

---

<sup>49</sup> Finlayson, James Gordon and Dafydd Huw Rees, "Jürgen Habermas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/habermas/> (Accessed on 5/23/2024).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

both constitutive elements of constitutional patriotism—a constitution and patriotism—rely on and are established in the public sphere. I refer to Finlayson and Rees’s assessment of Habermas:

This view is *constitutional* in that it revolves around the work of making, interpreting, and reflecting on the constitution, which takes place in the public sphere. It is *patriotic* in that it has a binding effect on the community of citizens, furnishing them with civic solidarity and a collective identity. The formation of constitutional-patriotic identity, significantly, takes place at the level of opinion- and will-formation in the public sphere.<sup>51</sup>

*Wilhelm Tell*, and the Rütli Schwur plot line in particular, exhibit such *Verfassungspatriotismus*.

As the last drama Schiller completed before his death in 1805, only a year after its first public performance in 1804, *Wilhelm Tell* stands out as a seminal work that conveys a concept of a moral and just rebellion that is crucial to Schiller’s moral philosophy. True to Schiller’s historiographical approach to his dramas, *Wilhelm Tell* retells the saga of its eponymous hero, the *Rütli Schwur* (Rütli oath), and the war of Swiss liberation fought against the Habsburg Empire in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The idea for the piece was originally brought to Schiller’s attention by Goethe, who, on a trip in Switzerland in 1797, wrote him expressing interest in the tale. Schiller immediately sensed the potential such an endeavor could have in stimulating the aesthetic senses. He writes Goethe on 30 October, 1797,

Die Idee vom dem Wilhelm Tell ist sehr glücklich [...] Es wird darin liegen, dass man, durch die Macht des Poeten, recht sehr beschränkt und in dieser Beschränkung innig und intensiv gerührt und beschäftigt wird. Zugleich öffnet sich aus diesem schönen Stoffe wieder ein Blick in eine gewisse Weite des Menschengeschlechts, wie zwischen hohen Bergen eine Durchsicht in freie Fernen sich auftut.<sup>52</sup>

The idea of William Tell is very fortuitous [...] It will lie in the fact that, through the power of the poet, one is very limited and in this limitation one is deeply and intensively moved and occupied. Simultaneously, from this beautiful material a view opens up again into a certain expansiveness of the human race, just as between high mountains a view opens up into vast distances.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe—Erster Band, Stuttgart. Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung. 1881 (<https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/goethe/brschill1/titlepage.html>) (Accessed on 23 April 2024)

As Schiller suggests, even the aesthetics of the alpine location, its sublimity, lends itself to his poetic endeavors. Tellingly, the drama begins with an idyllic alpine scene.

Hohes Felsenufer des Vierwaldstättersees, Schwyz gegenüber. Der See macht eine Bucht ins Land, eine Hütte ist unweit dem Ufer, Fischerknabe fährt sich in einem Kahn. Über den See hinweg sieht man die grünen Matten, Dörfer und Höfe von Schwyz im hellen Sonnenschein liegen. Zur Linken des Zuschauers zeigen sich die Spitzen des Haken, mit Wolken umgeben; zur Rechten im fernen Hintergrund sieht man die Eisgebirge. Noch ehe der Vorhang aufgeht, hört man den Kuhreihen und das harmonische Geläut der Herdenglocken, welches sich auch bei eröffneter Szene noch eine Zeitlang fortsetzt. (5)

High rocky shore of Lake Lucerne, opposite Schwyz. The lake forms a bay in the land, a hut is not far from the shore, a fishing boy is traveling in a boat. Across the lake you can see the green meadows, villages and farms of Schwyz lying in bright sunshine. To the viewer's left are the peaks of the Haken, surrounded by clouds; to the right in the distant background one can see the glaciers. Even before the curtain rises, one hears the songs of cowherds and the harmonious ringing of the herd bells, which continues for a while even after the scene opens.

The characters then proceed to sing a song to the “Melodie des Kuhreihens.”<sup>53</sup> This idyllic scene, however, is soon broken up by an approaching storm and the panicked entrance of Baumgarten, who professes to his countrymen that he has just killed the Kaiser’s Burgvogt (imperial seneschal), Wolfenschießen, because the latter sexually assaulted Baumgarten’s wife.

ALLE. *fahren zurück:*

Gott sei Euch gnädig! Was habt Ihr getan?

BAUMGARTEN. Was jeder freie Mann an meinem Platz!

Mein gutes Hausrecht hab ich ausgeübt

Am Schänder meiner Ehr und meines Weibes.

KOUNI. Hat Euch der Burgvogt an der Ehr geschädigt?

BAUMGARTEN. Dass er sein bös Gelüsten nicht vollbracht,

Hat Gott und meine gute Axt verhütet. (1.1.79-86)

ALL. *step back:*

God have mercy on you! What have you done?

BAUMGARTEN. What every free man in my place would have!

I have but used mine own good household right

---

<sup>53</sup> Even today, one would immediately recognize this melody as it is often used in various forms of media to depict states of bliss or serenity.

'Gainst him that would have wronged my wife—my honor.

KUONI. And has he wronged you in your honor, then?

BAUMGARTEN. That he did not fulfill his foul desire  
Is due to God and to my trusty axe.<sup>54</sup>

Baumgarten begs for safe passage across the lake as the Burgvogt's men are in pursuit. The lake, however, is in violent uproar as a storm draws near. Fearing the Burgvogt's revenge, none of the Landsleute offer to ferry Baumgarten across the lake. Suddenly, Tell appears and without hesitation does what the others would not.

TELL. Wo's not tut, Fährmann, lässt sich alles wagen.

*Heftige Donnerschläge, der See rauscht auf.*

RUODI. Ich soll mich in den Höllenrachen stürzen?  
Das täte keiner, der bei Sinnen ist.

TELL. Der brave Mann denkt an sich selbst zuletzt,  
Vertrau' auf Gott und rette den Bedrängten. (1.1.136-140)

TELL. Where there is need, Ferryman, one can risk everything.

*Heavy thunder, the lake roars.*

RUODI. Am I to plunge into the jaws of hell?  
No one of sound mind would dare.

TELL. The brave man thinks upon himself the last.  
Trust in God, and rescue the beleaguered.<sup>55</sup>

Tell jumps into action and ferries Baumgarten across the lake. The scene concludes with the arrival of the Vogt's knights, who, after interrogating the Landsleute, raze the village and slaughter the livestock. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the drama; it is, in essence, a

---

<sup>54</sup> Translation from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm> (accessed on 4/23/2024)

<sup>55</sup> My translation.

microcosm of tyrannical rule. We are presented with a peaceful community, whose seemingly docile, rural lifestyle is violently disrupted by transgressions committed by the occupational forces of the Habsburgs. Tell thus acts out of concern for the common welfare. Indeed, the selfless hero who is ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good is a common motif throughout Schiller's depictions of rebellion. The further the drama progresses, the more transgressions the Landsleute must endure. Their plight leads us to one of the most pivotal scenes, that of the Rütli Schwur.

The Rütli Schwur in its historical context and as presented in Schiller's *Tell* evokes the founding of the Swiss confederation. A powerful symbol of Swiss national identity, the Rütli Schwur conjures nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, many of which are highlighted in Schiller's retelling. The oath also points to the necessity—particularly in this scene but also in the larger nexus of the drama's political contentions—of establishing a constitutional republic. The following analysis of this scene highlights key moments that support my argument that Schiller crafts a notion of *Verfassungspatriotismus* consistent with the philosophical ideas expressed in *Bühne* and the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. In outlining this argument, I will also address problematic elements of the drama's notion of nationalism and patriotism.

One of three main plot lines (Tell-Geßler, Rudenz-Berta, and that of the *Eidgenossen*), the meeting on the Rütli—a mountain meadow on Lake Lucerne—evokes notions of constitutional patriotism. The clandestine meeting of the three cantons (Uri, Unterwalden, and Schwyz) on the Rütli was the result of semi-public sphere discourse: public because it involved an open deliberation among citizens; semi due to the necessity of secrecy under Austrian

oppression.<sup>56</sup> While this discourse is not public in the Habermasian sense, it involves rational dialogue, shared concern for a common good, and equality among participants. I argue that this constitutes a proto-political form of engagement that evinces traits that Habermas considers characteristic of public-sphere discourse.

As the peaceful Swiss communities perceived Austrian rule as increasingly intolerable, a consensus for multilateral action emerged through this semi-public discourse. This discourse emerges first in the private sphere—in the home—and interestingly, in one of the drama’s pivotal scenes, involves a woman. As Hans Kaufmann notes in *Nation und Nationalismus in Schillers Entwurf “Deutsche Größe” und im Schauspiel “Wilhelm Tell,”* “Das Haus ist von Beginn an für die Figurengruppe der Rütli-Verschwörer derjenige Ort, an dem sich die Ethik der Herrschenden bewährt oder diskreditiert“ (164; From the very beginning, for the group of figures of the Rütli conspirators, the house is the place where the ethics of those in power are proven or discredited).

In the second scene of the first act, the noble Stauffacher meets with Pfeiffer. The latter, before departing, urges Stauffacher not to swear fealty to Austria,

PFEIFFER. Ja, ja Herr Stauffacher, wie ich Euch sagte.  
Schwör nicht zu Östreich, wenn Ihr’s könnt vermeiden.  
Haltet fest am Reich und wacker wie bisher,  
Gott schirme Euch bei Eurer alten Freiheit! (2.1.183-186)

PFEIFFER. Ay, ay, friend Stauffacher, as I have said,  
Swear not to Austria, if you can help it.  
Hold by the empire stoutly as of yore,  
And God preserve you in your ancient freedom!<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> As the Rütli Schwur was coordinated in secrecy to avoid detection from Austrian spies (“Wir sind umringt von Spähern”; We are surrounded by spies, 460), it does not entirely fit Habermas’ notion of the “public sphere”. What I am suggesting here situates the concept of shared discourse and sentiments in *Wilhelm Tell* as a function of a “semi-public sphere” where communal sentiments were nonetheless shared to form a general consensus.

<sup>57</sup> Translation by Theodore Martin, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0005](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm#link2H_4_0005) (Accessed on 27 May 2024)

As Stauffacher and Pfeiffer come to terms with the reality of their political situation, they must decide on a plan. The ensuing dialogue includes Stauffacher's wife Gertrud, who draws attention to the plight of those living in other cantons.

STAUFFACHER. Was ist zu tun?

GERTRUD. *tritt näher:*

So höre meinen Rat! Du weisst, wie hier  
Zu Schwyz sich alle Redlichen beklagen  
Ob dieses Landvogts Geiz und Wütereie.  
So zweifle nicht, dass sie dort drüben auch  
In Unterwalden und im Uner Land  
Des Dranges müd sind und des harten Jochs –  
Denn wie der Gessler hier, so schafft es frech  
Der Landenberger drüben überm See –  
Es kommt kein Fischerkahn zu uns herüber,  
Der nicht ein neues Unheil und Gewalt-  
Beginnen von den Vögten uns verkündet.  
Dum tät es gut, dass eurer etliche,  
Die's redlich meinen, still zu Rate gingen,  
Wie man des Drucks sich möcht erledigen.  
So acht ich wohl, Gott würd euch nicht verlassen,  
Und der gerechten Sache gnädig sein –  
Hast du in Uri keinen Gastfreund, sprich,  
Dem du dein Herz magst redlich offenbaren? (1.2.273-292)

STAUFFACHER. What's to be done?

GERTRUDE. *steps closer:*

Now hear what I advise.  
Thou knowest well, how here with us in Schwytz,  
All worthy men are groaning underneath  
This Gessler's grasping, grinding tyranny.  
Doubt not the men of Unterwald as well,  
And Uri, too, are chafing like ourselves,  
At this oppressive and heart-wearying yoke.  
For there, across the lake, the Landenberg  
Wields the same iron rule as Gessler here—  
No fishing-boat comes over to our side  
But brings the tidings of some new encroachment,  
Some outrage fresh, more grievous than the last.  
Then it were well that some of you—true men—  
Men sound at heart, should secretly devise

How best to shake this hateful thralldom off.  
Well do I know that God would not desert you,  
But lend his favor to the righteous cause.  
Hast thou no friend in Uri, say, to whom  
Thou frankly may'st unbosom all thy thoughts?<sup>58</sup>

Echoing Pfeiffer's sentiments, Gertrud argues that the moment calls for action. Convinced by his wife, Stauffacher holds council with the representatives of the other cantons, which leads to the decision to meet at the Rütli to swear an oath of allegiance. The lead-up to the meeting of the *Eidgenossen* exemplifies a consensus achieved through discourse.

WALTHER FÜRST. Wenn die drei Lande dächten wie wir drei,  
So möchten wir vielleicht etwas vermögen.

STAUFFACHER. Wenn Uri ruft, wenn Unterwalden hilft,  
Der Schwyzer wird die alten Bünde ehren.

MELCHTAL. Gross ist in Unterwalden meine Freundschaft,  
Und jeder wagt mit Freuden Leib und Blut,  
Wenn er am andern einen Rücken hat  
Und Schirm – O fromme Väter dieses Landes! (1.4.654-662)

WALTHER FÜRST. If the three Cantons thought as we three do,  
Something might, then, be done, with good effect.

STAUFFACHER. When Uri calls, when Unterwald replies,  
Schwytz will be mindful of her ancient league.

MELCHTAL. I've many friends in Unterwald, and none  
That would not gladly venture life and limb  
If fairly backed and aided by the rest.  
Oh, sage and reverend fathers of this land!<sup>59</sup>

Tellingly, the representatives of the three cantons, who plan to meet at the Rütli, evoke the ancient, natural rights of their forefathers. In essence, they are deliberating about what should be afforded via constitutional rights.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

The Swiss representatives do not seek to construct a new constitution, but rather hope to reaffirm and restore rights that they are naturally afforded and that were previously recognized under imperial immediacy. “Frei wählten wir des Reiches Schutz und Schirm./So steht’s bemerkt in Kaiser Friedrichs Brief“ (2.2.1214-1215.; Freely we sought the empire’s protection and shield—freely it was given./’Tis so set down in Emperor Frederick’s charter).<sup>60</sup> In this sense, the meeting of the three cantons ostensibly culminates in the creation of a democratically elected republic.<sup>61</sup>

RÖSSELMANN. Hört was mir Gott ins Herz gibt, Eidgenossen!  
Wir stehen hier statt einer Landsgemeinde,  
Und können gelten für ein ganzes Volk,  
So lasst uns tagen nach den alten Bräuchen  
Des Lands, wie wir’s in ruhigen Zeiten pflegen,  
Was ungesetzlich ist in der Versammlung,  
Entschuldige die Not der Zeit. Doch Gott  
Ist überall, wo man das Recht verwaltet,  
Und unter seinem Himmel stehen wir.

STAUFFACHER. Wohl, lasst uns tagen nach der alten Sitte,  
Ist es gleich Nacht, so leuchtet unser Recht.

MELCHTAL. Ist gleich die Zahl nicht voll, das *Herz* ist hier  
Des ganzen Volks, die *Besten* sind zugegen.

KONRAD HUNN. Sind auch die alten Bücher nicht zur Hand,  
Sie sind in unsre Herzen eingeschrieben. (2.2.1108-1122)

RÖSSELMANN. Confederates! listen to the words which God  
Inspires my heart withal. Here we are met  
To represent the general weal. In us  
Are all the people of the land convened.  
Then let us hold the Diet, as of old,  
And as we’re wont in peaceful times to do.  
The time’s necessity be our excuse

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Translation altered.

<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that Schiller’s portrayal of a “democratically elected republic” carries certain caveats: the *Rütlichschwur* was not conducted through any formal legal process—there was no written record—and Melchtal’s remark that “die Besten sind zugegangen” suggests that the event may not have fully represented the will of the people but rather reflects biases of the elite.

If there be aught illegitimate in this meeting.  
Still, wheresoe'er men strike for justice, there  
Is God, and now beneath his heaven we stand.

STAUFFACHER. 'Tis well advised. Let us, then, hold the Diet  
According to our ancient usages.  
Though it be night there's sunshine in our cause.

MELCHTAL. Few though our numbers be, the hearts are here  
Of the whole people; here the best are met.

KONRAD HUNN. The ancient books may not be near at hand,  
Yet are they graven in our inmost hearts.<sup>62</sup>

The discourse at the Rütli is conducted with a view to the greater good. Though there are dissenting voices in each canton—and indeed Rösselmann is swiftly voted down for expressing a desire to exercise restraint, even suggesting the Swiss swear fealty to the Austrians—the striving to represent all citizens by means of a meeting and common discourse, as a call for political action, is in essence democratic. As their name suggests, the *Eidgenossen* came together to swear an oath to protect one another against Austrian hostility. Their oath is the historical premise for the 1291 Swiss Federal Charter, one of the oldest constitutions in the world.

The Rütli scene is replete with evocative language that appears highly patriotic/nationalistic by contemporary standards. While such rhetoric is not in itself aggressive or exclusionary, it could be co-opted for a chauvinistic agenda. The beginning of the Rütli scene is, in essence, a retelling of how the Swiss came to settle in the Alps. In this history, the *Eidgenossen* endow their forefathers with an authority that undergirds their natural rights, but they also ground their unity in a claim of blood ties.

STAUFFACHER. *tritt in den Ring:*  
Wir stiften keinen neuen Bund, es ist  
Ein uralt Bündnis nur von Väterzeit,  
Das wir erneuern! Wisset Eidgenossen!

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Translation altered.

Ob uns der See, ob uns die Berge scheiden,  
Und jedes Volk sich für sich selbst regiert,  
So sind wir *eines* Stammes doch und Bluts,  
Und eine Heimat ist's, aus der wir zogen.

WINKELRIED.

So ist es wahr, wie's in den Liedern lautet,  
Dass wir von fernher in das Land gewallt?  
O teilt's uns mit, was Euch davon bekannt,  
Dass sich der neue Bund am alten Stärke. (2.2.1155-1165)

STAUFFACHER. *entering the circle:*

No new alliance do we now contract,  
But one our fathers framed, in ancient times,  
We purpose to renew! For know, confederates,  
Though mountain ridge and lake divide our bounds,  
And every Canton's ruled by its own laws,  
Yet are we but one race, born of one blood,  
And all are children of one common home.

WINKELRIED. Then is the burden of our legends true,  
That we came hither from a distant land?  
Oh, tell us what you know, that our new league  
May reap fresh vigor from the leagues of old.<sup>63</sup>

The reference to being “born of one blood” is problematic from the outset. It reproduces the same pitfalls that afflict Fichte’s *Reden*—a demonstrable collapse into exclusionary ethnic parameters. This rings particularly true when we consider that in *Wilhelm Tell*, as in many of Schiller’s dramas, the formation of national cohesion occurs in direct opposition to a foreign entity. The patriotic language used throughout *Tell* thus establishes ethnic parameters that demarcate and exclude foreign entities. The claim to the homeland [*Heimat*] boils down to hereditary claims, “So sind wir eines Stammes doch und Bluts” (2.2.1160). Obviously, such a notion can easily be co-opted. I would contend, however, that the claim of “Stamm und Blut”

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

negates any nativist ideas as the *Eidgenossen* are themselves immigrants who have come from “fernher in das Land.” Historically, this group of migrants was comprised of Romans, Celts, Lombards, Burgundians, Alemanni, etc. It is plausible that Schiller was aware of such diversity within the Kantons, further complicating the notion of blood ties.

The reception of Schiller’s *Tell* shows that the play was largely read as a celebration of democracy. Uwe Jansen writes,

Die Nachwirkungen von Schillers *Wilhelm Tell* waren so groß und nachhaltig wie bei kaum einem anderen literarischen Werk—[...]. Demokraten des Vormärz sahen in der schweizerischen Befreiungsgeschichte ein Vorbild für die in ihren Augen dringend notwendigen Veränderungen im deutschen und europäischen Raum. Gleichzeitig wurde Schillers Drama in diesen Jahren von den fürstlichen Zensurbehörden massiv gekürzt oder sogar ganz verboten. (160)

The impact of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* was as significant and lasting as with hardly any other literary work—[...]. Democrats of the pre-March period saw in the Swiss liberation story a model for the, in their eyes, urgently needed changes in the German and European context. At the same time, during these years, Schiller's drama was heavily censored or even banned altogether by princely censorship authorities.

Adolf Hitler, who publicly banned the drama, saw its inherently revolutionary potential as antithetical to the National-Socialist claim to power. Thus, while *Tell's* strong patriotic language could be used to promote a chauvinistic agenda, the play also conveys a different, important message: the fight for freedom against tyranny. In the larger context of the drama, Schiller’s patriotic language speaks primarily to a desire for unity and equality.

Schiller employs the patriotic sentiments of the *Eidgenossen* in the Rütli scene as an affective build-up to a declaration of unity, which, in Habermas’ terms, “has a binding effect on the community of citizens, furnishing them with civic solidarity and a collective identity.”<sup>64</sup> In

---

<sup>64</sup> Finlayson, James Gordon and Dafydd Huw Rees, "Jürgen Habermas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/habermas/> (Accessed on 5/23/2024).

*Machtphantasie Deutschland*, Hans Peter Herrmann identifies varied and often conflicting attitudes towards patriotism and nationalism in 18th-century discourses. Drawing on the work of historian Rudolf Vierhaus (1922-2011), Herrmann notes that 18<sup>th</sup>-century patriotic discourse was initially closely tied to the humanistic and universal goals of the Enlightenment.

[E]r [patriotismus] habe das Ziel gehabt, den einzelnen Bürger auf seine Verantwortung für das Gemeinwohl, das gemeine Beste, zu verpflichten, ihn unabhängig von der Standeszugehörigkeit für praktische Gemeinschaftsaufgaben zu interessieren und ihn in die Verantwortung für das Ganze einzubeziehen. (15)

It [patriotism] aimed to obligate individual citizens to their responsibility for the common good, to interest them in practical community tasks regardless of their social status, and to involve them in the responsibility for the whole.

This type of patriotism, as I argue, is exhibited in *Tell* and aligns with Schiller's larger body of political theories and philosophies. The desire to instill communal sentiments is the underlying premise of the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. The humanistic goals of the Enlightenment were not always met, however. The downward spiral of the French Revolution into bloodshed and violence represented a turning point in European history. As stated above, *Wilhelm Tell* is in many ways a direct response to the failures of the French Revolution. In the following section, I read *Tell* as a depiction of a successful revolution, antithetical to the French model.

### Schiller's Idealistic Revolution

There are, in essence, three main plotlines in the drama that inform the idealistic type of patriotism and national imaginings outlined above. Through these plotlines, which involve the characters Tell and Geßler, Berta and Rudez, and the *Eidgenossen*, Schiller illustrates key issues that inform the drama's progressive, egalitarian concept of a social and political revolution.

These key issues include class antagonism and the right to armed resistance.

The French revolutionaries sought to remedy economic, political, and social injustice. With rising inflation and increasing food shortages, the Third Estate challenged the power of the *ancien régime* by calling for the abolishment of feudalism. The idealistic promises of the revolution, however, soon devolved into bloodshed. The Third Estate's failure to reconcile conflicts among different interest groups, their mishandling of religion and the Church, and the escalating violence, including executions of members of the upper estates, fomented dissent. The Revolution began to fall out of favor. Davidson writes,

It seems that the French people were increasingly alienated by the Revolution. Whether this was primarily due to recent political events, like the Revolutionaries' growing quarrel with the Catholic Church or the agitation over the King's flight to Varennes and the subsequent schism in the Jacobin Club, or whether it was mainly due to inflation, food shortages and economic hardship must be uncertain. Either way, the conclusion was becoming unavoidable: by the end of the *Assemblée nationale constituante* and the transition to the *Assemblée nationale législative*, the people of France and the people of Paris had lost almost all of their enthusiasm for the Revolution. (76)

As Davidson notes, internal schisms within revolutionary circles played a crucial role in the revolution's decline into violence. These schisms can be attributed to a failure to coalesce despite divergent opinions and desires. Violent civil conflicts were prevalent, notably around 1793, with dissenters leading armed skirmishes against pro-revolutionary forces.

Some of these rebellions were in part uprisings in support of the *Girondins* and in protest at their expulsion from the *Convention*, while others were in part protests at the assertion of supreme political power by the *Montagnards* and the Paris *sans-culottes*, [...] other rebellions were triggered by quite distinct local power struggles between pro- and anti-Revolutionary factions. (167)

Schiller was cognizant of these conflicts and reflected on them, specifically in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. In his assessment of these failures, Schiller notably addresses differences of opinion in the political process. In his article "Schiller's Aesthetic Republicanism," Douglas Moggach notes, "For Schiller, as for other proponents of German idealism, it is the tension

between analytical and synthetic moments, between difference and unity, which defines the political trajectory of modernity” (526). Indeed, Schiller advocates for a progressive republicanism that achieves unity but accounts for diversity. He understood that you cannot enforce unity by suppressing difference, as the French attempted to do. Moggach continues,

Despite his repugnance at the course that the French Revolution assumed in 1793, Schiller does not renounce politics, but advocates a new kind of politics compatible with modern individuality and its differentiated forms. How is it possible to secure harmony without producing uniformity, and without suppressing spontaneity? [...] To cite Schiller’s own formulation: ‘A political constitution will still be very imperfect if it can bring about unity only by the suppression [*Aufhebung*] of multiplicity.’ [...] In Schiller’s assessment, this inability to accommodate diversity is among the failures of the French Revolution. Previous republicanism had often demanded uniformity; the new republicanism acknowledges difference and seeks to balance diverse interests with a commonality of purpose. (528)

Perhaps *Tell*’s investment in commonality of purpose is most clearly visible in how Schiller handles class distinctions.

At its core, *Tell* is a story of emancipation and revolution, but, unlike the French Revolution, which led to the dismantling of the ruling class, Schiller preserves elements of the aristocracy as necessary components of his idealistic revolution. The ruling upper-class Swiss not only maintain their status in the drama but are instrumental in the redistribution of power and rights. As functionaries under imperial immediacy, the Swiss nobles were, in theory, allowed to manage and rule their respective communities without outside interference. In his article, “Schillers ‘Wilhelm Tell,’” Gonthier-Louis Fink speaks of “ein antijakobinisches republikanisches Schauspiel” (an anti-Jacobin republican play),

In diesem Schauspiel ist zwar viel von Freiheit die Rede, aber zunächst geht es nicht um die politische Freiheit, die die 'Déclaration des droits de l'homme' 1789 verkündet hatte, sondern um die „alte“, verbriefte, von jedem Kaiser neu beschworene Schweizer Freiheit, das heißt um das Privileg der Reichsunmittelbarkeit, wodurch die Schweizer Urkantone den Reichsrittern und den freien Reichstädten gleichgestellt waren, wie Gertrud Stauffacher ihrem Mann gegenüber betont:

(. . .) Vom Kaiser selbst und Reich Trägst du dies Haus zu Lehn, du darfst es zeigen, So gut der Reichsfürst seine Länder zeigt, Denn über dir erkennst du keinen Herrn Als nur den Höchsten in der Christenheit — (262 ff.)

Dank dieser Reichsunmittelbarkeit, die sie nur zum Heerbann des Reiches verpflichtete und dem Kaiser nur die oberste „richterliche Macht“ (224), das heißt den „Blutbann“ (1233) überließ, konnten die Schweizer ihr Land republikanisch verwalten. (63)

There is a lot of talk about freedom in this play, but primarily it is not about the political freedom that the 'Déclaration des droits de l'homme' proclaimed in 1789, but about the "old" Swiss freedom, guaranteed and invoked anew by every emperor, that is, the privilege of imperial immediacy, which meant that the original Swiss cantons were on an equal footing with the imperial knights and the free imperial cities, as Gertrud Stauffacher emphasizes to her husband:

From the emperor himself Thou holdest in fief the lands thy fathers left thee.  
There's not a prince in the empire that can show a better title to his heritage;  
For thou hast over thee no lord but one, and he the mightiest of all Christian kings.<sup>65</sup>

Thanks to this imperial immediacy, which obliged them only to military duty to the empire and left the emperor only with the highest "judicial power" (224), i.e. the "blood ban" (1233), the Swiss were able to administer their country in a republican manner [republikanisch].

The Habsburg violation of this agreement is the fulcrum of the drama's call to action. Schiller introduces an idyllic alpine landscape with lower-class figures: the "Fischerknabe," "Hirte," and "Alpenjäger" (fisher, herdsman, and hunter). Ruodi, Kuoni, Werni, and Seppi are *bäuerliche* characters who serve a lord. Herding the cows down from their summer meadows, Werni comments to Kuoni:

WERNI. Und schmuckes Vieh – Ist's Euer eigenes, Landsmann?

KUONI. Bin nit so reich – 's ist meines gnädigen Herrn,  
Des Attinghäusers, und mir zugezählt. (1.1.50-52)

WERNI. And pretty cattle, too. Are they your own?

KUONI. I'm not so rich. They are the noble lord's  
Of Attinghaus, and trusted to my care.

---

<sup>65</sup> *Wilhelm Tell* translation from [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0005](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm#link2H_4_0005)

This relatively small detail sets the stage for important class dynamics, most notably in the aftermath of the revolution but also in the events leading up to the drama's conclusion.

So far, I have discussed the Rütli scene primarily as it is evocative of a *Verfassungspatriotismus*. While I have argued that the oath taken at the Rütli was facilitated, in large part, by semi-public discourse, I have yet to touch on the class dynamics that informed this process. While the primary representatives of the *Eidgenossen* were upper class, there was also a cadre of various other *Landleute* present, including representatives of the lower classes. The stage directions for the second scene of the second act read: "Melchtal, Baumgarten, Winkelried, Meier von Sarnen, Burkhardt am Bühel, Arnold von Sewa, Klaus von der Flüe und noch vier andere *Landleute*, alle bewaffnet" (Melchtal, Baumgarten, Winkelried, Meier von Sarnen, Burkhardt am Bühel, Arnold von Sewa, Klaus von der Flüe and four other peasants, all armed). Shortly thereafter, even more representatives appear in a similar fashion, including Walther Fürst, Rösselman der Pfarrer, Peter Mann der Sigrüst, Kuoni der Hirt, Werni der Jäger, and Ruodi der Fischer, along with more *Landleute*. The main dialogue in the scene is driven by representatives of the upper class, but it includes the clergy and lower-class figures, such as Kuoni, Werni, and Ruodi. This alliance of upper and lower classes runs counter to the French model but solidifies Schiller's republican outlook. That they are all armed [*bewaffnet*] further indicates equal status amongst the different classes. However, while all are present and privy to the deliberation on the Rütli, only some hold positions of political importance. While deciding which member should serve as Richter (magistrate/judge) for the proceedings, it is noted:

STAUFFACHER. So nehme Uri denn das Schwert, sein Banner  
Zieht bei den Römerzügen uns voran.

WALTHER FÜRST. Des Schwertes Ehre werde Schwyz zuteil,  
Denn seines Stammes rühmen wir uns alle.

RÖSSELMANN. Den edeln Wettstreit lasst mich freundlich schlichten,  
Schwyz soll im Rat, Uri im Felde führen.

WALTHER FÜRST. *reicht dem Stauffacher die Schwerter.*  
So nehmt!

STAUFFACHER. Nicht mir, dem Alter sei die Ehre.

IM HOFE. Die meisten Jahre zählt Ulrich der Schmied.

AUF DER MAUER. Der Mann ist wacker, doch nicht freien Stands,  
Kein eigner Mann kann Richter sein in Schwyz.

STAUFFACHER. Steht nicht Herr Reding hier der Altlandammann?  
Was suchen wir noch einen Würdigern?

WALTHER FÜRST. Er sei der Ammann und des Tages Haupt!  
Wer dazu stimmt erhebe seine Hände. (2.2.1133-1145)

STAUFFACHER. Let Uri have the sword. Its banner  
Leads the way in the Roman campaigns.

WALTHER FÜRST. Schwytz, then, must share the honor of the sword;  
For it's the honored ancestor of all.

RÖSSELMANN. Let me arrange this noble controversy.  
Uri shall lead in battle—Schwytz in council.

WALTHER FÜRST. (gives Stauffacher the sword):  
Then take your place.

STAUFFACHER. Not I. Some older man.

IM HOFE. Ulrich, the smith, is the most aged here.

AUF DER MAUER. A worthy man, but he is not a freeman;  
No bondman can be judge in Switzerland.

STAUFFACHER. Is not Herr Reding here, our old Landamman?  
Where can we find a worthier man than he?

WALTHER FÜRST. Let him be Amman and the Diet's chief?  
You that agree with me hold up your hands!

This scene gestures towards Schiller's more conservative concept of rebellion. While the French Revolutionaries sought to collapse class distinctions, Schiller is intent on maintaining the Swiss upper classes. Instead of class antagonism, we find social cohesion. Schiller's nobility is not afflicted with the moral failings associated with 18<sup>th</sup>-century ruling bodies. In Schiller's play, the Swiss nobility is not driven by selfish motives; rather, the aristocracy is concerned with the well-being of the entire community. This point is further evidenced in Schiller's representation of Attinghausen and Rudez.

In the first scene of the second act, Rudenz is called before his uncle. Attinghausen attempts to convince Rudenz to abandon his life of luxury and remain loyal to the Swiss cantons. Although Attinghausen is a nobleman, he is committed to his subjects.

RUDENZ. Ich sehe, dass Ihr meiner nicht bedürft,  
Ich bin ein Fremdling nur in diesem Hause.

ATTINGHAUSEN. *hat ihn lange mit den Augen gemustert:*  
Ja leider bist du's. Leider ist die Heimat  
Zur Fremde dir geworden! – Uli! Uli!  
Ich kenne dich nicht mehr. In Seide prangst du,  
Die Pfauenfeder trägst du stolz zur Schau,  
Und schlägst den Purpurmantel um die Schultern,  
Den Landsmann blickst du mit Verachtung an,  
Und schämst dich seiner traulichen Begrüßung. (2.1.777-783)  
[...]

RUDENZ. Was können wir,  
Ein Volk der Hirten gegen Albrechts Heere!

ATTINGHAUSEN. Lern dieses Volk der Hirten kennen, Knabe!  
Ich kenn's, ich hab es angeführt in Schlachten,  
Ich hab es fechten sehen bei Favenz.  
Sie sollen kommen, uns ein Joch aufzwingen,  
Das wir entschlossen sind, nicht zu ertragen!  
– O lerne fühlen, welches Stamms du bist! (2.1.908-914)

RUDENZ. I see, my presence is not needed here,  
I am but as a stranger in this house.

ATTINGHAUSEN. (gazes fixedly at him for a considerable time).

Alas, thou art indeed! Alas, that home  
To thee has grown so strange! Oh, Uly! Uly!  
I scarce do know thee now, thus decked in silks,  
The peacock's feather flaunting in thy cap,  
And purple mantle round thy shoulders flung;  
Thou lookest upon the peasant with disdain,  
And takest with a blush his honest greeting.  
[...]

RUDENZ. What can we,  
A shepherd race, against great Albert's hosts?

ATTINGHAUSEN. Learn, foolish boy, to know this shepherd race!  
I know them, I have led them on in battle—  
I saw them fight at Favenz.  
Austria will try, forsooth, to force on us  
A yoke we are determined not to bear!  
Oh, learn to feel from what a race thou'rt sprung!<sup>66</sup>

Rudenz remains unconvinced by his uncle, however, and does not alter his course until he is charmed by the noble-born Bertha, who champions the *Volk*. While the nobility is often portrayed as emotionally stifled and driven by material gain, Schiller depicts an upper class that is in touch with their own emotions and with commoners. In many ways, Schiller idealizes the existing hierarchical structure, as Fink explains,

Schiller idealisierte jedoch diese Leibeigenschaft, indem er am Beispiel des alten Attinghausen zeigte, wie patriarchalisch sie gehandhabt wurde: Herr und Knechte bildeten wirklich eine große Familie. „Es geht aus einem Becher und aus einem Herzen." (764 ff.) So daß von dieser Seite die „Hirtenidylle" unbeschadet weiter bestehen konnte, auch wenn neben diesen Leibeigenen, die jedoch nicht als Nachfahren „der alten Schweizer" betrachtet wurden, andere Einwohner wie der Pfarrer Rösselmann feudale Verpflichtungen übernommen hatten.

However, Schiller idealized this serfdom by using the example of old Attinghausen to show how patriarchally it was handled: master and servants truly formed one large family. "It comes from one cup and from one heart" (764 ff.). So that from this point of view, the "shepherd's idyll" could continue to exist undamaged, even if alongside these

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

serfs, who were not viewed as descendants of "the old Swiss", other residents such as Pastor Rösselmann had taken on feudal obligations.

For Schiller, this hierarchy is essential; it provides a necessary role as a transitional form of governance, until, ideally, the fruition of a *Menschenrepublik* comes about. This, in large part, serves as an alternative to the model of the French Revolution.

By asserting absolute authority, the French Third Estate abolished the existing structures of governance but failed to establish an adequate replacement. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), a prominent critic of the French Revolution, objects to such a radical break with tradition: "The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers" (25-26). Schiller's play offers such a link to the inheritance from forefathers. Instead of creating an entirely new system of governance, Schiller highlights the benevolent actions of those who are already in positions of power, as demonstrated by Attinghausen, who bestows rights and privileges upon the lower classes. Similarly, in *ex machina* fashion, Bertha and Rudenz, in the last few lines of the drama, grant freedom to their subjects, thus ensuring an organic emergence of democracy from an aesthetically educated and capable populace.

BERTA. Landleute! Eidgenossen! Nehmt mich auf  
In euern Bund, die erste Glückliche,  
Die Schutz gefunden in der Freiheit Land.  
In eure tapfre Hand leg ich mein Recht,  
Wollt ihr als eure Bürgerin mich schützen?

LANDLEUTE. Das wollen wir mit Gut und Blut.

BERTA. Wohlan!

So reich ich diesem Jüngling meine Rechte,<sup>67</sup>  
Die freie Schweizerin dem freien Mann!

RUDENZ. Und frei erklär ich alle meine Knechte. (5.3.3288-3291)

BERTA. Country people! Confederates! Take me in  
In your union, the first happy one,  
Who protection found in the freedom land.  
I place my rights in your brave hand,  
As your citizen, do you want to protect me?

LANDLEUTE. Ay, that we will, with life and fortune both!

BERTA. Well done!  
So I give this young man my right hand,  
The free Swiss woman for the free man!

RUDENZ. And I declare all of my servants free!

Thus, the idyllic and lofty model of social change that Schiller portrays is informed by a concept of revolution in its more literal sense: a return to a previous state or position.

The notion of a return to a previous state is already alluded to in the Rütli oath's reaffirmation of "ein alter Bund." This old union is that of the forefathers. Thus, the revolution does not herald a new system of governance but rather seeks to reaffirm the old. Dieter Borchmeyer notes in his article "Altes Recht und Revolution. – Schillers 'Wilhelm Tell,'" "

Der Begriff »Revolution« stammt aus der Astronomie — es sei an Kopernikus erinnert, der seinem astronomischen Hauptwerk den Titel gegeben hat: >»*De revolutionibus orbium caelestium*« —, er bezeichnet hier den in sich zurückkehrenden kreisförmigen Umlauf der Gestirne, als politische Metapher mithin die Wiederkehr der Zeiten, schließlich die Wiederherstellung des alten Rechts, die Restauration eines durch Despotismus gestörten Rechtszustandes, also gerade nicht einen Neuanfang unter entschiedenem Bruch mit der Vergangenheit. Der tiefgreifende Unterschied zwischen

---

<sup>67</sup> Schiller appears to employ a double entendre here with the usage of "meine Rechte," which implies both Berta's 'right hand' (a marriage proposal) and the extension of her "Rechte," or rights (preceding Rudenz' extension of freedom to his servants).

dem alten und dem neuen Revolutionsbegriff ist den Zeitgenossen der Französischen Revolution durchaus bewußt gewesen. (72)

The term "revolution" originates from astronomy - one need only remember Copernicus, who entitled his main astronomical work: "*De revolutionibus orbium caelestium*" - here he describes the circular orbits of the stars that returns upon itself, as a political metaphor the return of the times, ultimately the restoration of the old law, the restoration of a legal order that had been disrupted by despotism, i.e., precisely not a new beginning marked by a decisive break with the past. The contemporaries of the French Revolution were well aware of the profound difference between the old and the new concept of revolution.

It is telling how Schiller portrays the actual events of the Swiss revolution in his drama. In the following, I will analyze the revolutionary events in *Wilhelm Tell*, in particular, the storming of fortresses and the assassinations of Geßler and the Kaiser. I pay particular attention to the political actions of Tell and the *Eidgenossen*.

Both the Rütli oath and the activities of the *Eidgenossen* are presented as forms of collective action. They evolve from semi-public discourse and the swearing of an oath to armed resistance in overtaking Austrian-held fortresses—a feat that is accomplished with virtually no bloodshed. The implausibly clean and bloodless forcible ejection of the Austrian forces stands in contrast to the violent excess perpetrated by the French revolutionaries. Exemplary of such measured attitudes is the character Melchtal—whose father’s eyes had been gouged out in the first scene. Although he shows signs of impetuosity, Melchtal keeps his vengeful desires in check. “Ich sah den Landvogt an der Tafel schwelgen—Urteilt, ob ich mein Herz bezwingen kann, Ich sah den Feind und ich erschlug ihn nicht“ (1064ff) (I saw the viceroy feasting at his table— Judge if I’m master of myself or no! I saw the tyrant, and I slew him not!).<sup>68</sup> The drama’s climactic ending returns once more to this moment of restraint: Upon storming the Austrian fortresses, Melchtal has the opportunity to exact violent revenge.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

WALTHER FÜRST. Wo ist der Landenberg?

MELCHTAL. Über den Brünig.

Nicht lag's an mir, dass er das Licht der Augen  
Davontrug, der den Vater mir geblendet.  
Nach jagt' ich ihm, erreicht' ihn auf der Flucht,  
Und riss ihn zu den Füßen meines Vaters.  
Geschwungen über ihm war schon das Schwert,  
Von der Barmherzigkeit des blinden Greises  
Erhielt er flehend das Geschenk des Lebens.  
*Urfehde* schwur er, nie zurückzukehren,  
Er wird sie halten, unsern Arm hat er  
Gefühlt.

WALTHER FÜRST. Wohl Euch, dass Ihr den reinen Sieg  
Mit Blute nicht geschändet!

KINDER. *eilen mit Trümmern des Gerüstes über die Szene:*  
Freiheit! Freiheit! (5.1.2903-2914)

WALTHER FÜRST. Where is the Landenberg?

MELCHTAL. Across the Bruenig.

No fault of mine it was, that he, who quenched  
My father's eyesight, should go hence unharmed.  
He fled—I followed—overtook and seized him,  
And dragged him to my father's feet. The sword  
Already quivered o'er the caitiff's head,  
When at the entreaty of the blind old man,  
I spared the life for which he basely prayed.  
He swore *Urfehde*, never to return:  
He'll keep his oath, for he has felt our arm.

WALTHER FÜRST. Thank God, our victory's unstained by blood!

CHILDREN. (running across the stage with fragments of wood).  
Liberty! Liberty!

Walther Fürst's declaration that their victory was won "unstained by blood" speaks to the values of the *Eidgenossen*. They do not fall victim to *Schwärmerei*.<sup>69</sup> Fink comments,

---

<sup>69</sup> "Schwärmerei" is a term used to denote excessive enthusiasm, typically in reference to the overzealous Jacobins of the French Revolution.

Während bei der Erstürmung der Bastille viel Blut floß und danach sogar die Köpfe des Gouverneurs und eines Bürgervogtes auf Piken herumgetragen wurden, waren die Schweizer Zwingfesten ohne Blutvergießen genommen worden, wenigstens in der utopischen Sicht des Autors. (78)

While much blood was shed during the storming of the Bastille and even the heads of the governor and a city official were carried around on pikes afterward, the Swiss fortresses were taken without bloodshed, at least in the author's utopian view.

This portrayal of a clean victory unsoiled by horrendous violence is a crucial component of Schiller's "utopian" revolution. So is the Tell-Geßler plotline, as I show below.

In earlier sections, I examined how class dynamics shape the drama's *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism). While the *Eidgenossen* play a significant role, Tell remains the central figure and heroic protagonist. However, Schiller took artistic liberties with the Tell-Geßler storyline, the most striking of which is his portrayal of Tell's actions as isolated and personal. Notably, Schiller omits Tell from the Rütli scene—even though his historically informed source material suggests Tell was present. Schiller isolates Tell's actions, framing them as an individual and therefore non-political actions, in order to maintain a morally justified vision of rebellion. That is to say, Tell's killing of Geßler is framed as an act driven by personal/individual motivation separate from the political, emancipatory actions of those present at the Rütli.

Throughout the drama, Tell remains, by and large, a private man, who refrains from engaging in politics. He is a simple family man who, although ready and willing to help those in need, does not participate in the actions of the *Eidgenossen*.

TELL. Die Schlange sticht nicht ungereizt.  
Sie werden endlich doch von selbst ermüden,  
Wenn sie die Lande ruhig bleiben sehn.

STAUFFACHER. Wir könnten viel, wenn wir zusammenstünden.

TELL. Beim Schiffbruch hilft der einzelne sich leichter.

STAUFFACHER. So kalt verlasst ihr die gemeine Sache?

TELL. Ein jeder zählt nur sicher auf sich selbst.

STAUFFACHER. Verbunden werden auch die Schwachen mächtig.

TELL. Der Starke ist am mächtigsten *allein*.

STAUFFACHER. So kann das Vaterland auf Euch nicht zählen,  
Wenn es verzweiflungsvoll zur Notwehr greift?

TELL. *gibt ihm die Hand:*

Der Tell holt ein verlornes Lamm vom Abgrund,  
Und sollte seinen Freunden sich entziehen?  
Doch was ihr tut, lasst mich aus eurem *Rat*,  
Ich kann nicht lange prüfen oder wählen,  
Bedürft ihr meiner zu bestimmter *Tat*,  
Dann ruft den Tell, es soll an mir nicht fehlen. (1.3.430-445)

TELL. The serpent stings not till it is provoked.  
Let them alone; they'll weary of themselves,  
Whene'er they see we are not to be roused.

STAUFFACHER. Much might be done—did we stand fast together.

TELL. When the ship founders, he will best escape  
Who seeks no other's safety but his own.

STAUFFACHER. And you desert the common cause so coldly?

TELL. A man can safely count but on himself!

STAUFFACHER. Nay, even the weak grow strong by union.

TELL. But the strong man is the strongest when alone.

STAUFFACHER. Your country, then, cannot rely on you  
If in despair she rise against her foes.

TELL. Tell rescues the lost sheep from yawning gulfs:  
Is he a man, then, to desert his friends?  
Yet, whatsoe'er you do, spare me from council!  
I was not born to ponder and select;  
But when your course of action is resolved,  
Then call on Tell; you shall not find him fail.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Abstaining from political deliberations, Tell embodies the ideal of an honest family man whose actions are predicated upon protecting his wife, children, and neighbors. Tellingly, Schiller isolates the drama's most pivotal and contentious action, the killing of Geßler, from the other overtly political events. In so doing, he distances his depiction of revolution and violence from what transpired in France. The Apfelschuss scene is the catalyst for Tell's decision to kill Geßler, who is, in many ways, his antithesis: he has no family we know of and is by nature ruthless and selfish. Tell notes Geßler's lack of family ties, suggesting that only a man who does not have children would place a child in harm's way.

TELL. Herr – Welches Ungeheure sinnet Ihr  
Mir an – Ich soll vom Haupte meines Kindes –  
– Nein, nein doch, lieber Herr, das kömmt Euch nicht  
Zu Sinn – Verhüt's der gnäd'ge Gott – das könnt ihr  
Im Ernst von einem Vater nicht begehren! (3.3.1890-1894)

[...]

Ich soll der Mörder werden meines Kinds!  
Herr, Ihr habt keine Kinder – wisset nicht,  
Was sich bewegt in eines Vaters Herzen. (3.3.1900-1903)

TELL. What monstrous thing, my lord, is this you ask?  
That I, from the head of mine own child!—No, no!  
It cannot be, kind sir, you meant not that—  
God in His grace forbid! You could not ask  
A father seriously to do that thing!

[...]

That I should be the murderer of mine own child!  
My lord, you have no children and do not know  
The tender throbbings of a father's heart.

Of course, those familiar with the saga know that Tell successfully makes the shot. When he collars a second bolt (intended for Geßler should the first shot fail), Tell is summarily arrested.

Those who witnessed the heinous trial were shocked and in uproar, prompting the hasty retreat of Geßler and company. En route to a prison in Küßnacht, Tell escapes his captors, thanks in part to the inclement weather, and commits himself to taking Gessler's life.

In the third scene of the fourth act, Tell lies in wait for Geßler, who must make his way through a narrow pass to reach Küßnacht. Tell is convinced that Geßler must die for the safety of his family and Landleute, but this decision does not sit easily with him. Indeed, Schiller emphasizes Tell's internal turmoil.

TELL. [...]

Ich lebte still und harmlos – Das Geschoss  
War auf des Waldes Tiere nur gerichtet,  
Meine Gedanken waren rein von Mord –  
Du hast aus meinem Frieden mich heraus  
Geschreckt, in gärend Drachengift hast du  
Die Milch der frommen Denkart mir verwandelt,  
Zum Ungeheuren hast du mich gewöhnt –  
Wer sich des Kindes Haupt zum Ziele setzte,  
Der kann auch treffen in das Herz des Feinds. (4.3.2569-2577)

TELL. [...]

I lived quietly and harmlessly - The shot  
Was aimed only at the forest animals,  
My thoughts were pure of murder -  
You have taken me out of my peace  
Frightened, you have transformed within me  
The milk of pious thinking into fermenting dragon poison,  
You've got me used to such abominations -  
Whoever sets himself the head of the child as his target,  
He can also hit the heart of the enemy.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> My translation.

This monologue demonstrates that violence is the last resort for Tell, a moral attitude that contrasts with 18<sup>th</sup>-century German perceptions of the French Revolution that cast the revolutionaries as bloodthirsty and, as Schiller put it, turned even women into hyenas.<sup>72</sup> Paradoxically, the implausibly clean and largely non-violent storming of the fortresses in *Tell* (the core of the drama's revolution) is paired with a murder that is portrayed as justified. Tell's act of murder is an isolated act of self-defense intended to protect his family, not to support a larger political agenda. Herbst writes, "Tell wendet sich aber nicht gegen das System als solches; er betont vielmehr ausdrücklich, daß er den Vogt des Kaisers als seinen Herrn anerkennt; nur gegen die menschenverachtenden Übergriffe Geßlers will er sich zu Wehr setzen" (433; But Tell does not turn against the system as such; rather, he expressly emphasizes that he recognizes the emperor's steward as his lord; he only wants to defend himself against Geßler's inhumane transgressions). Here, Schiller again props up existing hierarchical structures, portraying them as necessary, while transforming the wanton rage against the political system that he identified with the French Revolution into the legitimate defense of a family man. It would appear that Schiller is himself grappling with the moral justification of violence. He has constructed a rather unlikely hypothetical situation that demands a violent response. The drama's last scenes return to this moral quandary. Here, Schiller contrasts the murder of Geßler with that of the Emperor.

---

<sup>72</sup> Schiller presents an allegory to violent excesses of the French Revolution in his poem "Das Lied von der Glocke" (1799). "Freiheit und Gleichheit! hört man schallen,/ Der ruhge Bürger greift zur Wehr,/ Die Straßen füllen sich, die Hallen,/ Und Würgerbanden ziehn umher,/ Das werden Weiber zu Hyänen/ Und treiben mit Entsetzen Scherz,/ Noch zuckend, mit des Panthers Zähnen,/ Zerreißen sie des Feindes Herz." (Freedom and equality! one hears resounding,/ The calm citizen takes up arms,/ The streets fill up, the halls,/ And gangs of stranglers roam about,/ Women become hyenas/ And jest with horror,/ Still twitching, with the panther's teeth,/ They tear the enemy's heart) <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/gedichte/chap150.html> (Accessed on 20 May 2025).

In the second scene of the fifth act, Tell, upon finally returning to his family, is confronted by a cloaked man who reveals himself to be Johannes Parricida, nephew and murderer of the Kaiser. Upon learning of this heinous act, Tell is taken aback.

TELL. *zu dem Mönch:*

Ihr seid der Herzog  
Von Österreich – Ihr seid's! Ihr habt den Kaiser  
Erschlagen, Euern Ohm und Herrn.

JOHANNES PARRICIDA. Er war  
Der Räuber meines Erbes.

TELL. Euren Ohm  
Erschlagen, Euern Kaiser! Und Euch trägt  
Die Erde noch! Euch leuchtet noch die Sonne!

JOHANNES PARRICIDA. Tell hört mich, eh Ihr –

TELL. Von dem Blute triefend  
Des Vaternordes und des Kaisermords,  
Wagst du zu treten in mein reines Haus,  
Du wagst's, dein Antlitz einem guten Menschen  
Zu zeigen und das Gastrecht zu begehren? (5.2.3163-3173)

TELL. *to the monk:*

You are the Duke  
From Austria – it's you! You have the emperor  
Slain, your uncle and lord.

JOHANNES PARRICIDA. He was  
The robber of my inheritance.

TELL. Your Uncle  
Slain, your emperor! And the Earth carries you  
Still! The sun still shines on you!

JOHANNES PARRICIDA. Tell hear me, before you –

TELL. Dripping with blood  
Of patricide and imperial murder,  
Do you dare to enter my pure house,  
You dare to show your face to a good person  
And desire the right to be a guest?

Schiller needs this scene to further set Tell's act of "murder" apart from the heinous crime committed by Parricida. Where Tell killed Geßler in an act of self-defense, Parricida, as Schiller contends, killed his uncle, the emperor, for materialistic reasons. Parricida justifies his actions by claiming that he too acted to protect his rights.

MÖNCH. [PARRICIDA] Ihr erschlugt  
Den Landvogt, der Euch Böses tat – Auch ich  
Hab' einen Feind erschlagen, der mir Recht  
Versagte – Er war Euer Feind wie meiner –  
Ich hab' das Land von ihm befreit. (5.2.3153-3156)

MONK. You have slain  
The governor, who did you wrong. I too,  
Have slain a foe, who late denied me justice.  
He was no less your enemy than mine.  
I've rid the land of him.

Tell considers Parricida's reasoning woefully misguided; to him, the murder of the emperor is an unnatural and immoral act.

TELL. Unglücklicher!  
Darfst du der Ehrsucht blut'ge Schuld vermengen  
Mit der gerechten Notwehr eines Vaters?  
Hast du der Kinder liebes Haupt verteidigt?  
Des Herdes Heiligtum beschützt? das Schrecklichste,  
Das Letzte von den Deinen abgewehrt?  
– Zum Himmel heb' ich meine reinen Hände,  
Verfluche dich und deine Tat – Gerächt  
Hab ich die heilige Natur, die *du*  
Geschändet – Nichts teil' ich mit dir – Gemordet  
Hast *du*, ich hab mein Teuerstes verteidigt. (5.2.3175-3185)

TELL. Unhappy man!  
May you mix bloody guilt ambition  
With a father's righteous self-defense?  
Did you defend the children's dear head?

Protected the sanctuary of the hearth? the most terrible,  
The last of yours warded off?  
– I raise my pure hands to heaven,  
Curse you and your deed – Avenged  
I have the holy nature that you have  
Defiled - I share nothing with you - Murdered  
You committed, I defended my most precious thing.

In the conclusion of *Wilhelm Tell*, Schiller presents a case for the justified use of violence; however, Tell's actions remain contentious even today. The drama continues to confront audiences with a central question: to what extent is violence permissible? On one hand, Schiller's portrayal of revolution in *Tell* serves as a counterpoint to the excesses of the French Revolution; on the other, he argues that the assassination of tyrants can, under certain circumstances, be legitimate.

### Conclusion

Schiller's aesthetics undergirds his political thinking. And his political theories, as demonstrated in his philosophical essays and in *Wilhelm Tell*, illuminate his concepts of patriotism and nationalism. Schiller argues that an appreciation of and exposure to beauty, freedom in appearance, fosters maturity. The desired harmony of emotion and rationality manifests in the beautiful soul. Schiller posits further that such an aesthetic state of being would curb the maladies that plague mankind. Although such an ideal state is ultimately unattainable, as Schiller himself admitted, it nonetheless offers a direction towards which humanity should strive. In *Schaubühne* and *Ästhetische Erziehung*, Schiller offers a programmatic theory. He presents the theater as a medium that exposes the individual to the potentially transformative power of art. Hence, this prolific German poet, playwright, and philosopher penned a plethora of historical dramas that seek to remedy the ailments of the human condition.

For Schiller, chief amongst these ailments is the oppressive and tyrannical rule of European monarchs. Schiller believed that many who hold positions of power in governance lack a critical sense of sympathy for the plight of the average citizen. Schiller attributes this in part to the overbearing rationality of the Age of Enlightenment. The tyrannical overreach of 18<sup>th</sup>-century monarchs led to two of the most (in)famous revolutions in Western history. While the colonists in North America successfully shook off the fetters of tyranny—albeit while maintain the institution of slavery—the French Revolution took a grim turn, which was closely observed by Schiller. Both revolutions initially offered hope for change within the fractured *Kleinstaaterei* of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. With the escalation of violence in France, however, many Germans liberals were turned away with disgust. Schiller, however, continued to envision a brighter future for humanity. He also held out hope for the creation of a collective identity and political system—a republic—which could combat tyrannical overreach.

In *Wilhelm Tell*, Schiller imagines a German nation founded on the principles laid out in the *Ästhetische Erziehung*. Throughout *Tell*, Schiller frames the creation of a unified Swiss nation through the lens of *Verfassungspatriotismus*, a form of patriotism rooted in a set of core principles laid out in a constitution. Following Habermas' analysis, I have argued that *Tell* imagines a Swiss nation that does not rely on ethnic or racial parameters but instead creates national identity through the shared ideals of the constitution. Furthermore, Schiller's ideal *Menschenrepublik* emphasizes a need for empathy. This reorientation avoids many of the pitfalls of the more prevalent exclusionary forms of nationalism. Furthermore, I have argued that in *Tell*, national identity is formed via a (semi)-public discourse that seeks to address the needs of every citizen. Schiller is acutely aware of class boundaries, advocating for a top-down bourgeois

revolution orchestrated by a ruling class “enlightened” by an aesthetic education. Schiller’s depiction of such a revolution, however, seems wildly unrealistic.

Importantly, Schiller tailors his theories of revolution and national imaginings to a context of oppression. Although his concept of the nation is, by and large, egalitarian, it is forged in the fires of direct conflict. How such a nation would manifest in the absence of violent conflict with an external enemy remains unclear. I would argue that the prevalence of armed conflict in Schiller’s historical dramas is representative of the times and speaks to the issues he sought to address. While Herder offered a concept of the nation based on cultural and linguistic parameters, Schiller addressed the ubiquity of tyrannical oppression. From this vantage point, I now move on to a discussion of Kleist’s fantasies of a German nation, which is the most reactionary and potentially harmful.

### Chapter 3: Kleist's Subversive Patriotism: Anti-Napoleonic Rage and the German Nation

Heinrich von Kleist's (1777-1811) literary contributions to nationalistic discourse around 1800 are particularly volatile and complex. As such, an analysis of his similarly volatile and complex life can add much to the discussion of nationalism and patriotism around 1800. As an officer in the Prussian military, Kleist witnessed firsthand the wars brought to German-speaking territories by Napoleon. This militaristic conquest sparked the first flames of politically reactionary German nationalism and stoked a fervent patriotism. I have argued throughout this dissertation that Herder's nationalistic imaginings revolve around cultural and linguistic parameters. Herder was an ardent critic of European colonialism, and his brand of nationalism takes on a utopian and egalitarian hue. While Schiller also championed many of Herder's egalitarian notions, via his idea of an idealistic *Menschenrepublik*, for example, his imaginings of a German nation are formed in the face of tyrannical oppression and adversity, leaving one to wonder how his theories would materialize sans violent conflict.

In a similar vein, Kleist formulates his grammar of resistance in direct opposition to French aggression under Napoleon's leadership. In contrast to Herder and Schiller, however, Kleist's anti-Napoleonic, anti-occupation writings contain overtly violent and graphic depictions of warfare. While Schiller's liberation dramas also feature violence, I contend that such violence in Schiller is dwarfed by Kleist's often hyperbolic savagery. Violence and brutality are but one facet of Kleist's intriguing and complex narrative structures, however. His writings are riddled with paradox and subversive elements, leaving space for a myriad of interpretations. Concerning ideations of a German nation, Kleist openly takes a stance against French occupation by calling upon his fellow compatriots to take up arms against tyranny. Kleist issues this call to arms in 1808/09, years that have often been cited as a critical point in his literary and political

engagement. In 1809, Napoleon won a pyrrhic victory over Austria at the Battle of Wagram—and Kleist published several texts with a clear nationalistic political agenda: political pamphlets for the planned patriotic publication *Germania* (including selections such as *Katechismus der Deutschen*), and his anti-Napoleonic drama *Die Hermannsschlacht*. My analysis of Kleist's notion of German national identity will predominantly focus on these works. I argue that they are the most volatile and evocative examples of Kleist's nationalistic ideations, even as they are simultaneously critical of them. These works are hostile toward the French occupiers and intended to fuel German patriotism, but they also offer a nuanced critique of the patriotism and nationalism they promote. Thus, while Kleist's ideations of the German nation promote a form of nationalism that embraces violence, I contend that he is also highly cognizant of the danger inherent in such nationalism.

The works of the German writers that I am covering in this dissertation intersect with the early stages of German nationalistic imaginings around 1800, with Kleist (and Fichte) representing the first tangible pulse of widespread German nationalistic sentiment and patriotic fervor. While many Germans liberals were sympathetic to the revolutionary spirit of the age, they were rather apathetic to the idea of a nationalizing revolution prior to Napoleon's campaigns. Well-known *Aufklärer* Freiherr von Knigge, for example, postulated that the Germans have no reason to fear or desire a revolution. And Goethe, on the eve of the fall of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, famously lamented that he found the quarrels of his cab driver to be more compelling than the news of the empire's collapse. In response to the defeat of the Prussian military at Jena and Auerstedt, however, many would soon be at odds with Goethe's indifference. Hagen Schulze notes,

This catastrophe was the first spark which set German nationalism alight. The latent anti-French *motif* which had pervaded the culture of the educated middle classes in Germany since the late eighteenth century now contained a new and sharper chord; the people and their language were discovered as the only and final legitimizing basis for the nation. (49)

The occupation inspired Fichte's *Reden*, and it is relevant for the Kleistian context; opposition to French culture galvanized disgruntled Germans for nationalistic aims. Unlike Fichte and Herder, however, Kleist does not use language as a metric by which to assess and/or assign "Germanness"; rather, his literature can be seen as resistance in praxis, that is, Kleist's literary productions were written in German, for Germans with specific nationalizing aims. As Gesa von Essen explains,

Dies gilt insbesondere für die Texte aus dem Jahr 1809, die in ihrer Struktur, Funktion und Wirkung als politische Dichtung in den Blick zu nehmen sind. Anders als bei reiner Agitations- oder Propagandadichtung ist es für politische bzw. politisch engagierte Dichtung konstitutiv, daß sie immer auch den Anspruch erhebt, Literatur zu sein. (102)

This applies in particular to the texts from 1809, which must be considered political poetry in terms of their structure, function, and effect. Unlike pure agitation or propaganda poetry, it is constitutive of political or politically committed poetry that it always also aspires to be literature.

In the following analysis of Kleist's patriotic writings in 1808/9, I posit that although Kleist called the Germans to arms to resist the tyrant he saw in Napoleon, he was simultaneously critiquing institutions of power. Before analyzing selected writings from *Germania* and *Die Hermannsschlacht*, I will first explore relevant theories of nationalism and identify key philosophical beliefs that inform Kleist's literary works.

## Theoretical Contributions to Kleist's Life Plan

As stated above, the year 1808 marks a tangible shift in German national consciousness. Prior to Napoleon's pan-European campaign, Herder, and the German literary sphere in general, embraced a cultural/linguistic nationalism. In the revolutionary period, as Schulze notes, "the concept of nationalism in terms of a state, [...] along the lines of the American or even the French Revolution at its beginning," seemed to offer some promise of social liberties based on Enlightenment values.<sup>73</sup> In chronicling the history and development of nationalism in the European context, Hobsbawm divides distinct national movements into three phases. In *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, he writes,

In nineteenth-century Europe, for which it was developed, phase A was purely cultural, literary and folkloric, and had no particular political or even national implications, [...] In phase B we find a body of pioneers and militants of 'the national idea' and the beginnings of political campaigning for this idea. [...] Phase C [is when] nationalist programmes acquire mass support, or at least some of the mass support that nationalists always claim they represent. The transition from phase B to phase C is evidently a crucial moment in the chronology of national movements. (12)

Indeed, the transition from phase B to C is precisely where I would locate the first wave of widespread German nationalism circa 1808, as represented in Kleist's (and Fichte's) literary nationalistic imaginings. To this end, one could then situate Herder in phase A and Schiller somewhere early in phase B, where, as I have demonstrated, there is an impetus present for a national idea: Herder via culture and language and Schiller via advocacy of rebellion. In Kleist

---

<sup>73</sup> Schulze, Hagen. *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck, 1763-1867*. Translated by Sarah Hanbury-Tenison, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

and Fichte's case, however, there was certainly a surge of nationalistic sentiment as a result of Napoleon's European campaigns.

It is not difficult to imagine what sort of violent reaction a military occupation would elicit. Schiller, for example, draws out the tyrannical nature of such occupations throughout his historical dramas whilst illustrating his vision of rebellion. And even Herder claims that the unprovoked aggression of one nation against another is an inhuman, worse than animalistic endeavor.<sup>74</sup> In Kleist, these attitudes find their most flammable outlet. In many ways, Kleist's historically informed drama stands in stark contrast to Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. As this chapter will argue, Hermann serves as an anti-hero, and Kleist's drama, although heavily laden with nationalistic sentiments, can be read as a warning against chauvinism and out-of-control nationalism. Where Schiller depicts an idealized rebellion carried out by virtuous figures, Kleist depicts deception, treachery, and bloodlust; his Hermann is no Tell. And yet, both Schiller's and Kleist's representations of tyranny are fueled by a desire for self-determination and freedom. Both tell stories of emancipatory action, albeit in drastically different manners. Where Schiller condemns excessive violence, Kleist seems to imply its necessity in fulfilling liberatory goals. I argue that Kleist's drama is a cry for emancipation and national unity; at the same time, it depicts a nihilistic reality in which such goals can be achieved only at great cost and through morally dubious actions.<sup>75</sup> As Peter Hanenberg writes in his chapter on *Die Hermannsschlacht* in *Ossian*

---

<sup>74</sup> "Der Krieg, wo er nicht erzwungene Selbstvertheidigung, sondern ein toller Angriff auf eine ruhige, benachbarte Nation ist, ist ein unmenschliches, ärger als thierisches Beginnen, indem er nicht nur der Nation, die er angreift, unschuldigerweise Mord und Verwüstung droht, sondern auch die Nation, die ihn führt, ebenso unverdient als schrecklich hinopfert" (War, where it is not forced self-defense, but a savage attack on a quiet, neighboring nation, is an inhuman, worse than bestial endeavor, in that it not only threatens the innocent nation it attacks with murder and devastation, but also, undeservedly and horribly, sacrifices the nation that wages it). Herder, Johann Gottfried, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/herder/humanita/chap011.html> (Accessed on 5 April 2025).

<sup>75</sup> Throughout his literary oeuvre, Kleist frequently engages with questions of morality and justice. Such inquiries, however, often give rise to further questions, as nothing appears definitive, and clear examples of unequivocal morality are difficult to discern. Marie Haller-Neumann and Dieter Rehwinkel write in their introduction to *Kleist-*

and *National Epic*, “Neither right, nor mercy, nor love: there is nothing one can count on, when the absolute goal of national interest is to be achieved.” Indeed, Hanenberg’s thesis sums up Hermann’s *modus operandi* (144). Kleist's depiction of the battle in the Teutoburger Wald was not a novel contribution to German national ideation; it is arguably, however, the most volatile.

Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht*, a particularly controversial work, embraces nationalistic furor. To preface the larger conversation surrounding *Die Hermannsschlacht* and affiliated texts, it is helpful to explore some of the factors that contributed to Kleist’s “radicalization” and that, in turn, inform his re-mythologizing of the Arminius drama. The first major event that marks a radical shift in Kleist’s intellectual outlook is the so-called “Kant Krise” [Kant crisis].

Kleist’s early occupation as an officer in the Prussian military followed family tradition. His military career, much to his family’s dismay, was short-lived (1792 to 1799), likely due to his disillusionment after serving in the War of the First Coalition against the French revolutionary forces. In a letter addressed to his friend Christian Ernst Martini, dated 19 March 1799, Kleist states his ardent distaste for the military.

[D]er Soldatenstand, dem ich nie von Herzen zugethan gewesen bin, weil er etwas durchaus Ungleichartiges mit meinem ganzen Wesen in sich trägt, so verhaßt, daß es mir nach und nach lästig wurde, zu seinem Zwecke mitwirken zu müssen. Die größten Wunder militairischer Disciplin, die der Gegenstand des Erstaunens aller Kenner waren, wurden der Gegenstand meiner herzlichsten Verachtung; die Offiziere hielt ich für so viele Exerciermeister, die Soldaten für so viele Sklaven, und wenn das ganze Regiment seine Künste machte, schien es mir als ein lebendiges Monument der Tyrannei.<sup>76</sup>

The military profession, to which I have never been wholeheartedly attached, because it carries within itself something wholly at odds with my entire being, became so odious to me that it gradually became irksome to have to contribute to its cause. The greatest marvels of military discipline, which were the object of the astonishment of all

---

*ein moderner Aufklärer?*, “Kleists hochempfindliches Bewusstsein von Recht und Ungerechtigkeit führte zu einer intensiven Auseinandersetzung mit diesem Themenbereich in seinen Novellen und Dramen“ (11, Kleist's highly sensitive awareness of justice and injustice led to an intensive examination of this topic in his novellas and dramas).

<sup>76</sup> <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/003> (Accessed on 29 January 2025)

connoisseurs, became the object of my most heartfelt contempt; the officers I took for so many drill masters, the soldiers for so many slaves, and when the whole regiment performed its arts, it seemed to me a living monument of tyranny.

Kleist's wholesale rejection of military life informs my analysis of *Die Hermannsschlacht* and similar texts: although patriotic and nationalistically charged, these works cannot be read simply as calls to arms; to do so would be to obfuscate the persistent ambiguity and subversion inherent in his texts. Kleist's depiction of Hermann's resistance does not bear the traditional hallmarks of a well-disciplined military force. Hermann's warriors function as independent agents ready and willing to create chaos, free from the constraints of traditional military hierarchy. *Die Hermannsschlacht* does not uphold the ideals of a traditional fighting force, as exemplified by the Prussian military. Kleist plausibly identifies tyranny not only in the oppression he perceives under Napoleon but also within the institutions of his own country.

Kleist abandoned his military career in favor of academic and literary pursuits. Even prior to his service in the military, Kleist had studied in Berlin under the tutelage of a preacher by the name of Samuel Heinrich Catel (1758-1838). Here, Kleist was exposed to Classical writers and Enlightenment philosophers, an influence that is highly visible in his literary oeuvre. Following his departure from the military, Kleist enrolled at the University of Viadrina, where he briefly studied mathematics before ultimately concluding that the discipline was overly rational and inadequate in addressing the complexities and range of human emotion, a sentiment that motivated him to explore literature in the next phase of his life. Like many who perceived the culture of rationalist thinking as stifling, Kleist turned to art and poetry with the belief that it could more effectively express and explain the human condition. In November 1799, Kleist wrote to his sister Ulrike,

Wenn man sich so lange mit ernsthaften abstrakten Dingen beschäftigt hat, wobei der Geist zwar seine Nahrung findet, aber das arme Herz leer ausgehen muß, dann ist es eine wahre Freude, sich einmal ganz seinen Ergießungen zu überlassen; ja es ist selbst nöthig, daß man es zuweilen in's Leben zurückrufe. Bei dem ewigen Beweisen u. Folgern verlernt das Herz fast zu fühlen; u. doch wohnt das Glück nur im Herzen, nur im Gefühl, nicht im Kopfe, nicht im Verstande. Das Glück kann nicht, wie ein mathematischer Lehrsatz bewiesen werden, es muß empfunden werden, wenn es da sein soll. Daher ist es wohl gut, es zuweilen durch den Genuß sinnlicher Freuden von Neuem zu beleben; u. man müßte wenigstens täglich ein gutes Gedicht lesen, ein schönes Gemälde sehen, ein sanftes Lied hören — oder ein herzliches Wort mit einem Freunde reden, um auch den schönern, ich mögte sagen den menschlicheren Theil unseres Wesen zu bilden.<sup>77</sup>

When one has occupied oneself with serious, abstract things for so long, in which the mind finds its nourishment, but the poor heart has to go away empty-handed, then it is a real joy to surrender oneself completely to its outpourings; indeed, it is even necessary that one calls it back to life from time to time. With the constant proving and reasoning, the heart almost forgets how to feel; and yet happiness resides only in the heart, only in the feeling, not in the head, not in the understanding. Happiness cannot be proven like a mathematical theorem; it has to be felt if it is to be there. Therefore, it is good to revive it from time to time by enjoying sensual pleasures; and one should at least read a good poem every day, see a beautiful painting, hear a gentle song - or speak a heartfelt word with a friend in order to form the more beautiful, I might say the more human part of our being.

Although Kleist was educated in the tradition of Enlightenment thought, he placed a high value on emotion, and his works strive to understand and portray the complexities of the human condition. During the period in which Kleist wrote the letter cited above, he felt listless. He had proposed to Wilhelmine von Zenge, daughter of the Prussian General Hartmann von Zenge. Rachel MagShamhráin notes that Wilhelmine's family met the proposal with strong reservations, as Kleist was but an "ex-Garde officer who had yet to embark on an alternative career path" (xiii). This rejection would motivate Kleist to leave the University of Viadrina, presumably to plot a clear course of action. Yet, as MagShamhráin continues, "the next part of his life was, in fact, marked by a sometimes chronic indecision and a great deal of seemingly aimless wandering" (xiv). Indeed, this marks the beginning of a rather radical transformation in Kleist's

---

<sup>77</sup> <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/006/normalisiert> (Accessed on January 20, 2025)

life trajectory. Around 1800, while Kleist was living in Würzburg, he engaged with Kant's philosophy in what is often referred to as his "Kant Krise." In a letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge of March 1801, Kleist writes,

Vor Kurzem ward ich mit der neueren sogenannten Kantischen Philosophie bekannt — u. Dir muß ich jetzt daraus einen Gedanken mittheilen, indem ich nicht fürchten darf, daß er Dich so tief, so schmerzhaft erschüttern wird, als mich. Auch kennst Du das Ganze nicht hinlänglich, um sein Interesse vollständig zu begreifen. Ich will indessen so deutlich sprechen, als möglich.

Wenn alle Menschen statt der Augen grüne Gläser hätten, so würden sie urtheilen müssen, die Gegenstände, welche sie dadurch erblicken, sind grün — und nie würden sie entscheiden können, ob ihr Auge ihnen die Dinge zeigt, wie sie sind, oder ob es nicht etwas zu ihnen hinzuthut, was nicht ihnen, sondern dem Auge gehört. So ist es mit dem Verstande. Wir können nicht entscheiden, ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint. Ist das letzte, so ist die Wahrheit, die wir hier sammeln, nach dem Tode nicht mehr — u. alles Bestreben, ein Eigenthum sich zu erwerben, das uns auch in das Grab folgt, ist vergeblich—<sup>78</sup>

I recently became acquainted with the newer so-called Kantian philosophy - and I must now share with you an idea from it, not fearing that it will shock you as deeply, as painfully, as it did me. You also don't know the whole thing sufficiently to fully understand its significance. However, I want to speak as clearly as possible.

If all people had green glasses instead of eyes, they would have to judge that the objects they see through them are green—and they would never be able to decide whether their eyes show them things as they are or add something to them that does not belong to them but to the eye. That's how it is with the mind. We cannot decide whether what we call truth is really truth or whether it only seems that way to us. If the latter, then the truth that we collect here is no longer there after death—and all efforts to acquire property that will follow us into the grave are in vain –

This moment is particularly striking as it denotes a tangible shift in Kleist's worldview, or rather a collapse thereof.<sup>79</sup> If he was feeling listless before, this moment would surely cement a sense of futility in any future prospects and endeavors. The Kant crisis has been characterized as a pivotal point in Kleist's life; it contributed to his disenchantment and fueled his political radicalization.

---

<sup>78</sup> <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/037> (Accessed on 22 January, 2025)

<sup>79</sup> Some scholars theorize that Kleist used this moment as pretext to call off his engagement to Wilhemina. In this sense, the Kant Krise could be seen as a strategic excuse rather than a moment of sincere disillusionment .

The “Kant Krise,” however impactful, was not the only contributing factor to Kleist’s radicalization. While in France on a trip, Kleist laments that the “ideas and ideals that he had associated with the Revolution were being debased” (MagShamhráin, xv).

O ich kann Dir nicht beschreiben, welchen Eindruck der erste Anblick dieser höchsten Sittenlosigkeit bei der höchsten Wissenschaft auf mich machte. Wohin das Schicksal diese Nation führen wird — ? Gott weiß es. Sie ist reifer zum Untergange als irgendeine andere europäische Nation. Zu weilen, wenn ich die Bibliotheken ansehe, wo in prächtigen Sälen u. in prächtigen Bänden die Werke Rousseaus, Helvetius, Voltaires stehen, so denke ich, was haben sie genutzt? Hat ein einziges seinen Zweck erreicht? Haben sie das Rad aufhalten könnten; das unaufhaltsam stürzend seinem Abgrund entgeneilt?<sup>80</sup>

Oh, I cannot describe to you the impression the first sight of this supreme immorality alongside the highest science made on me. Where will fate lead this nation - ? God knows. It is riper for ruin than any other European nation. From time to time, when I look at the libraries, where the works of Rousseau, Helvetius, and Voltaire stand in splendid halls and in splendid volumes, I think, what use have they been? Has a single one achieved its purpose? Have they been able to stop the wheel that is plunging inexorably towards its abyss?

Feeling more and more disillusioned, Kleist eventually settled in Switzerland, where he started writings his first three plays, *Der zerbrochene Krug* (1803-06), *Robert Guiskard* (1802-03), and *Die Familie Schroffenstein* (1802-03). An analysis of these works conveys a sense of disillusionment. According to the Kleist entry on Britannica, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, for example, “depicts pathological states with ruthless clarity. Underlying this drama of error is Kleist’s recurring theme, the fallibility of human perception and the inability of the human intellect by itself to apprehend truth.”<sup>81</sup> Throughout many of his works, Kleist is highly critical of political bodies and their institutions. The political turmoil that Kleist would experience during his time in Switzerland would only further catalyze these attitudes, ultimately leading to his more nihilistic views.

---

<sup>80</sup> <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/051> (Accessed 31 January 2025)

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Heinrich-von-Kleist> (Accessed 1 February 2025)

1802 would prove to be an inopportune time for Kleist to have embarked on a new life endeavor in Switzerland. Switzerland was drawn into the War of the Second Coalition, and the now precarious situation of the Helvetic Republic caused significant unrest. Kleist's personal life also seemed to be dissolving: he broke off his engagement to Wilhelmine von Zenge, suffered severe illness, and ultimately left his new home.<sup>82</sup> In what can plausibly be read as one of many mental breakdowns, Kleist, distraught about his inability to complete his *Guiskard* text, bizarrely attempted to join the French military, which could have led to a charge of treason by the Prussian government. The French, for their part, declined his proposition, sensing that he was likely a spy. This moment appears in scholarship to be a relatively minor, albeit odd, blip in his tragically short life. Yet, in light of his previously held disdain for the military and hatred for the French is a profoundly strange act. As I will show below, Kleist's attempt to join the French army is not only highly erratic but lends credence to the thesis that these texts, while highly nationalistic, are inconsistent at best. Indeed, Kleist's entire literary oeuvre is rife with paradox and inconsistencies. By 1805, Kleist was back in Prussia working as a civil servant, bringing us to what I would describe as the last critical phase in Kleist's life and literary trajectory.

The collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, catalyzed in large part by the French victory at Jena and Auerstedt, left Kleist and many Prussians with no other recourse but to flee. While the majority of those who fled French-occupied territory headed east, Kleist and a few companions headed west toward occupied Berlin. Kleist was imprisoned by the French at Fort de Joux, coincidentally the same prison that held Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803), a leader in the Haitian Revolution, which Kleist depicts in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* (1811). Once again,

---

<sup>82</sup> Kleist, Heinrich von, and Rachel MagShamhráin. *The Battle of Herrmann: A Drama*. Königshausen & Neumann, 2008. xv

Kleist's life plan was on precarious grounds. Yet, as MagShamhráin has noted, in a letter to Ulrike, Kleist pointed out that "his literary projects could be pursued in France just as well as anywhere else. In fact, the enforced isolation and monotony of prison life proved positively conducive to writing" (xvii). Part of this spurt in productivity was the establishment, albeit to varying degrees of success, of several literary journals published after his incarceration. His journal *Phöbus*, along with his other highly charged nationalistic anti-French writings, planted the seeds for *Die Hermannsschlacht*. In what can only be described as Kleistian fortune, these endeavors, like his life, would come to an untimely end. Kleist reached out to potential collaborators, including literary titans, such as Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland—only to be rejected. Furthermore, Goethe's production of Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* was a flop. Whether due to censorship or personal conflicts (Kleist had a falling out with Adam Müller, co-author of *Phöbus*), none of his journalistic endeavors yielded long-term success.

In 1809, after relocating to Prague, Kleist planned a patriotic periodical, entitled *Germania*, aimed explicitly at inciting the German nation to resist the French. I will analyze the contents of this journal, along with *Die Hermannsschlacht*, in detail as they demonstrate Kleist's nationalism. Kleist's *Germania* project coincided with the Austrian declaration of war on France in April of 1809. Sensing an opportune moment in the Napoleonic Wars, Kleist set his sights on Vienna, hoping that his drama would find a particularly receptive audience. He chose Vienna because no other city, due to censorship, was viable. Kleist expresses his hopes for a possible staging of his drama in a letter he wrote on 20 April 1809, to his friend and co-author of *Phöbus*, Heinrich Joseph von Collin (1771-1811):

Doch, wie steht's, mein theuerster Freund, mit der Hermannsschlacht? Sie können leicht denken, wie sehr mir die Aufführung dieses Stücks, das einzig und allein auf diesen Augenblick berechnet war, am Herzen liegt. Schreiben Sie mir bald: es wird gegeben;

jede Bedingung ist mir gleichgültig, ich schenke es den Deutschen; machen Sie nur, daß es gegeben wird.<sup>83</sup>

But what about the Battle of Herrmann, my dearest friend? You can easily imagine how much the performance of this play, which was calculated solely for this moment, is dear to my heart. Write to me soon: it will be performed; I don't care about any stipulations, I am giving it to the Germans; just make sure that it is performed.

This endeavor, too, would prove to be short-lived; Napoleon conquered Vienna the following May, and Kleist's hopes of having his drama and other writings delivered to the Germans at such a critical juncture were dashed.

The years leading up to Kleist's tragic end via a double-suicide pact with terminally ill Henriette Vogel in 1811 were wrought with political and financial turmoil. Desperate for stability, Kleist sought to reenlist with the Prussian military but was thwarted by Prince Wilhelm, second son of the Kaiser, who indicated that a return to service was not likely. Given Kleist's patriotic fervor and hatred for the French at the time, the final nail in his coffin was likely Friedrich Wilhelm's peace accord with the French, which foiled every effort on Kleist's part to conjure up a Prussian/German resistance against the French. And although Kleist was relatively productive (literarily) during these last few years, his works would not gain widespread fame until some 50 years later.

The events described in the previous sections highlight key moments in Kleist's life that, as I argue, influenced his worldview, ultimately fueling his radical nationalistic sentiments. His departure from the Prussian army, with the hopes of finding purpose and happiness, was met with setback after setback. The tipping point was likely the defeat of the coalition forces in the Third and Fourth Coalition Wars (1805-1807), signaling an end to Austrian and Prussian resistance. Kleist endured flight, imprisonment, censorship, and political destabilization, all of

---

<sup>83</sup> <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/152/normalisiert> (Accessed 9 February 2025)

which exacerbated his already precarious mental state and fueled a vitriolic, patriotic fervor. Kleist's last task, so it appears to me, was to galvanize a German resistance against the Napoleonic scourge. From this framing, we may now engage with Kleist's anti-Napoleonic writings, which comprise the bulk of his national imaginings.

### Anti-Occupation Rhetoric

From the various periodicals mentioned above, perhaps none was more suited to Kleist's tasks of propagandizing than *Germania*. Planned for publication and written in 1809 in Prague, *Germania* was poised to stoke the flames of German patriotic resistance against the French. At this juncture, Kleist's motives seem clear.

Diese Zeitschrift soll der erste Athemzug der deutschen Freiheit sein. Sie soll Alles aussprechen, was während der drei letzten, unter dem Druck der Franzosen verseufzten, Jahre in den Brüsten wackerer Deutschen hat verschwiegen bleiben müssen: alle Besorgniß, alle Hoffnung, alles Elend und alles Glück.<sup>84</sup>

This periodical is intended to be the first breath of German freedom. It should express everything that had to remain silent in the hearts of brave Germans during the last three years, when they were languishing under the pressure of the French: all fear, all hope, all misery, and all happiness.

Kleist wrote this in an emotionally volatile and financially precarious state. Since he was now intent on making a living as a writer, the stakes for him could not have been higher. During this difficult period, he crafted a vision of German identity and unification.

Above all, Kleist sought to promote resistance to tyranny. In this, his motivation resembled that of Schiller; unlike Schiller's works, however, Kleist's texts evince a proclivity for violence. Such hyperbolic violence is on full display in his poem "Germania an ihre Kinder."

---

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50979/pg50979-images.html#page-63> (Accessed on 10 February 2025)

Written in the spring of 1809, Kleist's poem, originally slated to be part of *Germania*, could certainly be categorized as agitation propaganda or even "hate poetry, intended to mobilize the population for war."<sup>85</sup> Indeed, it is hard to read the poem in any other light. In one of the more provocative stanzas, Kleist writes:

Alle Plätze, Trift' und Stätten,  
Färbt mit ihren Knochen weiß;  
Welchen Rab und Fuchs verschmähten,  
Gebet ihn den Fischen preis;  
Dämmt den Rhein mit ihren Leichen;  
Laßt, gestäuft von ihrem Bein,  
Schäumend um die Pfalz ihn weichen,  
Und ihn dann die Grenze sein!<sup>86</sup>

All places, tracks, and sites,  
Color white with their bones;  
What raven and fox spurned,  
Give it over to the fish;  
Damn the Rhine with their corpses;  
Let it, dammed by their bones,  
Foaming go around the Palatinate,  
And then be the borderline!

Kleist sent the poem to many of his acquaintances, most likely in an attempt, similar to *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, to get this highly provocative piece published. Like many of Kleist's works, however, this poem was published posthumously in 1813 in the "Staats- und Gelehrte Zeitung des Hamburgischen unpartheyischen Correspondenten." Aside from the violent resistance it calls for, the poem reflects other aspects of Kleist's propagandizing program, including cultural references to ancient Germanic tribes. Here, Kleist's usage of iambic pentameter can be read as an evocation of Schiller's famous ode, "An die Freude."

---

<sup>85</sup> <https://freies-deutsches-hochstift.de/en/mediaguide/romantik-ausstellung/2-obergeschoss/germania/germania-an-ihre-kinder-ode/> (Accessed on February 14 2025).

<sup>86</sup> Kleist, Heinrich von. "Germania an Ihre Kinder", <https://www.zgedichte.de/gedichte/heinrich-von-kleist/germania-an-ihre-kinder-eine-ode.html> (Accessed on February 14 2025).

“Germania an ihre Kinder” also contains seeds of Kleist’s reimagining of the Arminius drama. In the second stanza, Kleist writes:

Deutsche, mutger Völkerreigen,  
Meine Söhne, die, geküßt,  
In den Schoß mir kletternd steigen,  
Die mein Mutterarm umschließt,  
Meines Busens Schutz und Schirmer,  
Unbesiegt Marsenblut,  
Enkel der Kohortenstürmer,  
Römerüberwinderbrut!<sup>87</sup>

Germans, brave circle of peoples,  
My sons, who, kissed,  
Climb into my lap,  
Whom my mother’s arm embraces,  
The shield and protector of my bosom,  
Unconquerable Mars blood,  
Grandchildren of the cohort stormers,  
Roman conquerors' offspring.

Here, Kleist alludes to Arminius; the term “Römerüberwinderbrut” defines the Germans as descendants of the Germanic tribes that partook in the expulsion of the Romans from Germanic lands in 9 CE. Kleist evokes the resilience of these ancient Germans in an attempt to forge a new wave of German resistance against the French. In so doing, he offers a remythologized vision of the *Varusschlacht* that fits the needs of his nationalizing agenda. In his book *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, Herfried Münkler explains:

Unter dem Einfluss der Französischen Revolution und der sich in ihrem Gefolge entwickelnden politischen Dynamik hatte Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland eine Suche nach Nationalmythen und Nationalhelden eingesetzt, die an die Stelle der in der Jahrhundertmitte versiegten neostoischen Heroenmythik der höfischen Gesellschaft trat. Vom wieder aufgefundenen *Nibelungenlied* bis zu Goethes *Faust* und Tacitus *Germania*, vom Cheruskerfürsten Hermann/Arminius über den Stauferkaiser Barbarossa bis zum

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Reformator Luther wurden literarische Texte und historische Personen auf ihre Tauglichkeit zu politischen Gründungs- und Orientierungsmythen getestet. (12)

Under the influence of the French Revolution and the political dynamics that developed in its wake, a search for national myths and national heroes began in Germany at the end of the 18th century, replacing the neo-Stoic hero myths of courtly society that had petered out in the middle of the century. From the rediscovered *Nibelungenlied* to Goethe's *Faust* and Tacitus' *Germania*, from the Cheruscan prince Hermann/Arminius to the Hohenstaufen emperor Barbarossa and the reformer Luther, literary texts and historical figures were tested for their suitability as political foundation and orientation myths.

Kleist's remythologizing, however, is not primarily intended as an orientation myth, but rather serves a political function. Kleist's imagining of a German nation is less concerned with where the Germans come from; rather, it focuses on their ability to resist foreign invasion. Of course, the notion of "foreign" implies a form of othering; it would seem, however, that, unlike Fichte, Kleist does not aim at ethnic inclusivity, nor does he denote parameters for ethnic exclusivity. Rather, Kleist is concerned with establishing a base of resistance, regardless of ethnicity. In fact, he is far more interested in mobilizing resistance than in identifying the origins of the German *Volk*.<sup>88</sup> For the most part, Kleist's *othering* serves to lambast his enemy, i.e., the French or their literary surrogates, the Romans.

HERMANN. [...]

Ich glaub', der Deutsch' erfreut sich einer größern  
Anlage, der Italier doch hat seine mindre  
In diesem Augenblicke mehr entwickelt.  
Wenn sich der Barden Lied erfüllt,  
Und, unter *einem* Königscepter,  
Jemals die ganze Menschheit sich vereint,  
So läßt, daß es ein Deutscher führt, sich denken,  
Ein Britt' ein Gallier, oder wer Ihr wollt;

---

<sup>88</sup> The term "*Volk*" is a heavily laden one. Just as the concept of the nation was novel, terms that denoted nationhood were rare. MagShamhráin notes: "The translation of *Volk* is notoriously difficult. Depending on the context, it would be possible to translate it both as people and nation, and potentially even as race" (136). In her translation of *Die Hermannsschlacht*, MagShamhráin at times renders Volk/Völker as "people(s)". She continues, "The main reason for using 'peoples' in this case is that the plot, despite its evident prolepsis, takes place in a Europe far removed from the concept or reality of nations" (136). While I agree with MagShamhráin on the general understanding and usage of the term at the time, I argue that Kleist's usage of the term "*Volk*" contributed to a literary imaging of the nation and therefore could indeed be read as "nation".

Doch nimmer jener Latier, beim Himmel!  
Der keine andre Volksnatur  
Verstehen kann und ehren, als nur seine. (1.3)

HERMANN. [...]

While I believe that the German  
Has a superior disposition, the Italian,  
So far at least, has made better use of his lesser gifts.  
Yet, if what the bards sing ever comes to pass,  
And one day all of humanity is united  
Under the sceptre of a single sovereign,  
It's quite thinkable that the king might be a German,  
A Briton, Gaul, or whatever else you want;  
But, by heaven, he could never be a Latin,  
For Latins can't respect or comprehend  
Any national spirit other than their own.

While Hermann singles out the Latin/Roman as incapable of understanding other nations, he is open to the notion that a Briton or a Gaul (ironically enough) could be king. This refutes the idea of German exceptionalism. Indeed, in the “Katechismus der Deutschen, abgefaßt nach dem Spanischen, zum Gebrauch für Kinder und Alte” (Catechism of the Germans, Formulated in the Manner of the Spanish, for Use of Children and the Elderly), Kleist defines Germanness not ethnically but rather via its proximity to resistance. The first chapter of the *Katechismus*, titled “Von Deutschland überhaupt” defines for its audience what and who “Germans” are.

FRAGE. Sprich, Kind, wer bist Du?

ANTOWRT. Ich bin ein Deutscher.

FR. Ein Deutscher? Du scherzest. Du bist in Meißen gebohren, und das Land, dem Meißen angehört, heißt Sachsen!

ANTW. Ich bin in Meißen gebohren, und das Land, dem Meißen angehört, heißt Sachsen; aber mein Vaterland, das Land dem Sachsen angehört, ist Deutschland, und Dein Sohn, mein Vater, ist ein Deutscher.

FR. Du träumest! Ich kenne kein Land, dem Sachsen angehört, es müßte denn das rheinische Bundesland sein. Wo find ich es, dies Deutschland, von dem Du sprichst, und wo liegt es?

ANTW. Hier, mein Vater. — Verwirre mich nicht.

FR. Wo?

ANTW. Auf der Karte.

FR. Ja, auf der Karte! — Diese Karte ist vom Jahr 1805. — Weißt Du nicht, was geschehn ist im Jahr 1805, da der Friede von Preßburg abgeschlossen war?

ANTW. Napoleon, der korsische Kaiser, hat es nach dem Frieden durch eine Gewaltthat zertrümmert.

FR. Nun? Und gleichwohl wäre es noch vorhanden?

ANTW. Gewiß! — Was fragst Du mich doch!

FR. Seit wann?

ANTW. Seit Franz der Zweite, der alte Kaiser der Deutschen, wieder aufgestanden ist, um es herzustellen, und der tapfre Feldherr, den er bestellte, das Volk aufgerufen hat, sich an die Heere, die er anführt, zur Befreiung des Landes anzuschließen.<sup>89</sup>

QUESTION. Speak, child, who are you?

ANSWER. I am a German.

Q. A German? You are joking. You were born in Meissen, and the country to which Meissen belongs is called Saxony!

ANSW. I was born in Meissen, and the country to which Meissen belongs is called Saxony; but my fatherland, the country to which Saxony belongs, is Germany, and your son, my father, is a German.

Q. You are dreaming! I know of no country to which Saxony belongs, it would have to be the Rhineland. Where can I find it, this Germany of which you speak, and where is it?

ANSW. Here, my father. - Do not confuse me.

Q. Where?

ANSW. On the map.

Q. Yes, on the map! - This map is from 1805. - Don't you know what happened in 1805, when the Peace of Pressburg was concluded?

ANSW. Napoleon, the Corsican Emperor, destroyed it by an act of violence after the peace.

Q. Well? And yet it would still be there?

ANSW. Certainly! - What are you asking me!

Q. Since when?

ANSW. Since Franz the Second, the old Emperor of the Germans, rose again to establish it, and the brave commander he appointed called on the people to join the armies he was leading to liberate the country.

Importantly, Kleist does not give ethnic parameters for “Germans”/ “Germany” and, like Schiller (whom Kleist is evoking), he acknowledges the tenuousness of ethnic concepts when he writes

---

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50979/pg50979-images.html#page-82> (Accessed on 16 February 2025)

“Wo find ich es, dies Deutschland, von dem Du sprichst, und wo liegt es?”<sup>90</sup> Rather than making ethnic distinctions, Kleist prioritizes unity in resistance. This stands in contrast to Fichte’s extrapolations of ethnic criteria for Germans in the *Reden*. Yet, while Kleist’s national ideations differ from Fichte, they too lend themselves to misappropriation.

Kleist’s patriotic sentiments, conveyed through violent and rage-filled rhetoric, can easily be used to fuel dangerous forms of aggressive nationalism. Contemporary readers of “Germania an ihre Kinder” would have been hard-pressed to interpret the text as anything other than an explicitly anti-French poem and a call for an immediate violent response. One can debate the morality of violent resistance, especially in the case of the German-occupied territories circa 1809. Schiller’s historical dramas, for example, attempt to differentiate between wanton violence and a morally sound rebellion. *Wilhelm Tell* portrays a clean rebellion where violence is undertaken reluctantly as a last resort. Even Hitler saw in Tell a revolutionary figure who could inspire resistance amongst those he sought to oppress, and, for this reason, he had the drama banned. Unlike Schiller’s idealistic, purified vision of rebellion, however, Kleist’s violent, brutish rhetoric in his works around 1809 reflects a reactionary mindset. It is not surprising then that Kleist’s works, like Fichte’s, appealed to nationalist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just as Kleist and others remythologized the Arminius dramas of the past, so too did National Socialists employ Kleist’s interpretation of the *Varusschlacht* to bolster their nationalistic agenda. In the *Kleist-Handbuch*, Ingo Breuer writes,

Im Dritten Reich avancierte das Stück zum meistgespielten Drama Kleists überhaupt. Es galt als „Gründungsmythos des Dritten Reichs“, weil Herrmann beispielhaft die Einigung aller Germanen/Deutschen im gnadenlosen Kampf gegen den Feind vorgeführt habe.

---

<sup>90</sup> Schiller writes in *Xenien* (1796): “Deutschland? Aber wo liegt es? Ich weiß das Land nicht zu finden, Wo das gelehrte beginnt, hört das politische auf” (Germany? But where is it? I don’t know where to find the country. Where the scholarly begins, the political ends).

Diese im Ganzen erschreckende Rezeptions- und Wirkungsgeschichte kommt nicht von ungefähr. Zum einen hat schon Kleist selbst die historischen Fakten, seinen „einzig und allein auf diesen Augenblick berechneten“ Absichten entsprechend, ‘aktualisiert’, was die chauvinistischen bis faschistischen Interpreten dann in ihrem Sinne fortführten. Zum anderen gibt das Stück mit seiner hasserfüllten Einseitigkeit, mit seinen Totschlags-Parolen und seinen „Sieg-oder-Untergang“- Phantasien, die sich auch in den politischen Gedichten und Schriften Kleists aus dem Jahre 1809 immer wieder finden, genügend Ansatzpunkte für eine derartige Rezeption. (77)

In the Third Reich, the play became Kleist's most frequently performed drama. It was regarded as the “founding myth of the Third Reich” because Herrmann exemplified the unification of all Germanic tribes/Germans in a merciless fight against the enemy.

This generally frightening history of reception and impact is no coincidence. On the one hand, Kleist himself had already updated the historical facts in line with his intentions, which were “solely and exclusively calculated for this moment,” which the chauvinist to fascist interpreters then continued in line with their goals. On the other hand, the play, with its hate-filled one-sidedness, its slogans of manslaughter and its “victory or doom” fantasies, which can also be found again and again in Kleist's political poems and writings from 1809, provides sufficient starting points for such a reception.

Indeed, Kleist was pushing a violently nationalistic agenda of “victory or doom,” but this is not all he did. There is ample evidence that Kleist’s agenda, whatever reactionary sentiments it aroused, extended beyond “hate-filled one-sidedness.” In *Kleist: Sprache und Gewalt*, Anthony Stephens writes, “Nichts [...] deutet drauf hin, ‘daß Kleist in der Frage der aufklärerischen Grundprinzipien der Menschlichkeit den Rücken kehrt’” (11; Nothing [...] indicates ‘that Kleist, concerning the basic principles of the Enlightenment, turns his back on humanity’). As I will argue below, Kleist’s writings do indeed contain kernels of egalitarian thought. Before I turn to Kleist’s egalitarianism, however, I will show that, despite their rage-filled rhetoric, *Germania* and *Katechismus* nonetheless contain passages that allow us to see glimmers of an idealistic worldview. Even in Kleist’s anti-occupational writings.

As I have argued, Kleist’s *Katechismus* does not advance a concept of the nation based solely on ethnic or racial boundaries but rather highlights models of resistance. The text’s vitriol,

while indeed radicalizing, is always aimed at Napoleon and the French. In the fourth chapter of the *Katechismus* titled “Vom Ertzfeind”, Kleist writes,

FR. Wer sind Deine Feinde, mein Sohn?  
ANTW. Napoleon und, so lange er ihr Kaiser ist, die Franzosen.  
FR. Ist sonst niemand, den Du haßest?  
ANTW. Niemand auf der ganzen Welt.  
FR. Gleichwohl, als Du gestern aus der Schule kamst, hast Du Dich mit jemand, wenn ich nicht irre, entzweit?  
ANTW. Ich, mein Vater? Mit wem?  
FR. Mit Deinem Bruder; Du hast es mir selbst erzählt.  
ANTW. Ja, mit meinem Bruder! Er hatte meinen Vogel nicht, wie ich ihm aufgetragen hatte, gefüttert.  
FR. Also ist Dein Bruder, wenn er dies gethan hat, Dein Feind, nicht Napoleon der Korse, noch die Franzosen, die er beherrscht?  
ANTW. Nicht doch, mein Vater! — Was sprichst Du da?  
FR. Was ich da spreche?  
ANTW. Ich weiß nicht, was ich darauf antworten soll.<sup>91</sup>

Q. Who are your enemies, my son?  
ANSW. Napoleon and, as long as he is their emperor, the French.  
Q. Is there no one else whom you hate?  
ANSW: No one in the whole world.  
Q. Nevertheless, when you came from school yesterday, you fell out with someone, if I am not mistaken?  
ANSW: Me, my father? With whom?  
Q. With your brother; you told me so yourself.  
ANSW: Yes, with my brother! He had not fed my bird as I had arranged with him.  
Q. So your brother, if he did this, is your enemy, not Napoleon the Corsican, nor the French, whom he rules?  
ANSW: Not so, my father! - What are you saying?  
Q. What am I saying?  
ANSW: I do not know what to say to that.

In this somewhat absurd exchange, Kleist suggests that one’s hatred must be directed only towards the French (for as long as Napoleon is their emperor) and not towards anyone else in the world. Kleist sees no other recourse than to eradicate the French invaders. This differs in significant ways from Schiller’s representation of the killing of the tyrant Geßler by Tell. In

---

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50979/pg50979-images.html#page-82> (Accessed February 21 2025)

Schiller's play, Tell shoulders the enormous burden of assassinating Geßler to keep his family safe. In Schiller's text, a momentary act of violence unfolds in a non-political, individual sphere. By contrast, Kleist calls for mass violence in the national and political realms; yet, both Kleist and Schiller present violence as morally sound and justified. Schiller's tempered and highly idealistic depiction of rebellion suggests that he is acutely aware of violence's tendency to spiral out of control. Kleist, on the other hand, while ostensibly operating within a similar moral framework, advocates for extreme violence. Kleist's rage, however, is itself rooted in a sphere of morality—a morality that, paradoxically, is critical of the very violence and hatred it promotes.

From the onset, Kleist criticized the Prussian military and institutions of governance and power. He lamented that his experience in the military ran contrary to every fiber of his being. He perceived in the military institutions a chauvinism and authoritarianism that he found abhorrent; quite possibly, the same aversion to chauvinism and authoritarianism may have led him to detest Napoleon. In a text written for *Germania* titled "Was gilt es in diesem Kriege?" Kleist criticizes warfare and expresses contempt for abuses of state power.

Gilt es, was es gegolten hat sonst in den Kriegen, die geführt worden sind auf dem Gebiete der unermesslichen Welt? Gilt es den Ruhm eines jungen und unternehmenden Fürsten, der in dem Duft einer lieblichen Sommernacht von Lorbeern geträumt hat? Oder die Genugthuung für die Empfindlichkeit einer Favorite, deren Reitze, vom Beherrscher des Reichs anerkannt, an fremden Höfen in Zweifel gezogen worden sind? [...] Gilt es eine Provinz abzutreten, einen Anspruch auszufechten, oder eine Schuld-Forderung geltend zu machen, oder gilt es sonst irgend etwas, das nach dem Werth des Geldes auszumessen ist, heut besessen, morgen aufgegeben, und übermorgen wieder erworben werden kann?<sup>92</sup>

Is at stake here what was otherwise at stake in the wars that have been waged in the realm of the immeasurable world? Is it about the glory of a young and enterprising prince who dreamed of laurels in the fragrance of a lovely summer night? Or the satisfaction of the sensitivity of a favorite whose charms, recognized by the ruler of the empire, have been called into question at foreign courts? [...] Is there a province to be ceded, a claim to be fought out, or a debt to be claimed, or is there anything else that can be measured by the

---

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50979/pg50979-images.html#page-114> (Accessed on February 23 2025)

value of money, possessed today, given up tomorrow, and reacquired the day after tomorrow?

Kleist highlights the futility of war, criticizing the materialistic and egotistical motivations behind rulers' decisions to undertake such costly, murderous endeavors. This critique is crucial in assessing the larger corpus of Kleist's anti-Napoleonic writings. In the second paragraph of the text, Kleist imagines a just war conducted in the name of a virtuous community, concerned not with its glory, but with the well-being of its neighbors. Here, Kleist's egalitarian beliefs come into view.

Eine Gemeinschaft [sic] gilt es, [...] deren Gipfel, Tugend und Sittlichkeit überschattend, an den silbernen Saum der Wolken rührt, [...] eine Gemeinschaft, die, unbekannt mit dem Geist der Herrschsucht und der Eroberung, [...] die ihren Ruhm nicht einmal denken kann, [...] deren Wahrhaftigkeit und Offenherzigkeit gegen Freund und Feind gleich unerschütterlich geübt, bei dem Witz der Nachbarn zum Sprichwort geworden ist; die über jeden Zweifel erhoben, dem Besitzer jenes ächten Ringes gleich, diejenige ist, die die Anderen am Meisten lieben; deren Unschuld, selbst in dem Augenblick noch, da der Fremdling sie belächelt, oder wohl gar verspottet, sein Gefühl geheimnißvoll erweckt; dergestalt, daß derjenige, der zu ihr gehört, nur seinen Namen zu nennen braucht, um auch in den entferntesten Theilen der Welt noch Glauben zu finden.<sup>93</sup>

It is about a community [...] whose tree tops, overshadowing virtue and morality, touch the silver edge of the clouds, [...] a community which, not familiar with the spirit of domination and conquest, [...] which cannot even think of its glory, [...] whose truthfulness and open-heartedness are practiced unwaveringly towards friend and foe alike, has become a proverb in its neighbors' mind; which, raised above all doubt, like the owner of that true ring, is the one most loved by others; whose innocence, even at the moment when the stranger smiles at it, or even mocks it, mysteriously awakens its feeling; in such a way that he who belongs to it need only mention his name to find credence even in the most distant parts of the world.

Here, Kleist imagines a rather utopian community, a stark contrast to the vitriolic, hate-filled poetry evident throughout this publication. This duality maps onto what Hans Peter Hermann describes as two sides of the same coin: a peaceful, enlightened patriotism [*friedlichen*,

---

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50979/pg50979-images.html#page-97> (Accessed on March 1 2025)

*aufklärerischen Patriotismus*] and an aggressive, militant, romantic nationalism [*militant-aggressiven, romantischen Nationalismus*].<sup>94</sup> As Stephens notes,

Dem Haß der nationalen Feindschaft setzt Kleist die weltbürgerliche Vision des internationalen Austauschs entgegen, wenn er eine Zukunftsgemeinschaft skizziert, „die dem Menschengeschlecht nichts, in dem Wechsel der Dienstleistungen, schuldig geblieben ist, die den Völkern, ihren Brüdern und Nachbarn, für jede Kunst des Friedens, welche sie von ihnen erhielt, eine andere zurückgab“. (119)

Kleist counters the hatred of national enmity with the cosmopolitan vision of international exchange when he sketches a future community “which owed nothing to the human race in the change of services, which for every art of peace it received from them gave back to the peoples, its brothers and neighbors another.”

Clearly, in Kleist’s writing, there is both peaceful patriotism guided by Enlightenment values and aggressive nationalism. In her chapter “Anti-Napoleonic Rage and the Hope for a Better Future,”

Rebecca Stewart notes,

Kleist’s ode “Germania an ihre Kinder” is, when engaged with at all, often considered a sort of monstrous, rage-drunken rejection of Schiller’s humane brand of anti-occupation rhetoric rooted in joy, clemency, and universal brotherhood as a suitable paradigm. (165)

Yet, Stewart contends that Kleist’s anti-occupational literature may be closer to that of Schiller’s than we care to acknowledge. At their core, Kleist’s anti-occupational texts, while they do not adhere to Schiller’s aesthetics, nonetheless serve a similar purpose: a remythologizing intended to galvanize a German nation faced with tyranny. This is particularly evident in *Die Hermannsschlacht*, which combines a depiction of aggressive nationalism with a stark warning.

---

<sup>94</sup> “Patriotismus und Nationalismus lassen sich nicht in eine geordnete historische Abfolge bringen, beide gehören auch systematisch zusammen als die zwei miteinander verbrüderten Seiten neuzeitlicher Selbst- und Weltanschauung“ (Hermann, 12).

## (Re)mythologizing the Arminius Saga

*Die Hermannsschlacht* is perhaps the most salient work in Kleist's anti-occupation literary oeuvre. This five-act drama, a remythologized vision of the Arminius saga, presents a critical view of a German nation. Unlike previous depictions of the *Varusschlacht*, notably Klopstock's, Kleist's Hermann is not a valiant hero. Instead, the unification of the German nation depicted in this work leads to desolation and a prolonged war. The fact that Hermann is an anti-hero suggests that *Die Hermannsschlacht* is more than simply a "call to arms." Indeed, this drama offers a complex and often paradoxical vision of the German nation. Anothony Stephens notes, "Die fiktionale Welt von Kleists *Hermannsschlacht* ist deshalb eine verarmte, weil sie die Wirklichkeit des Napoleonischen Zeitalters direkt widerspiegeln soll und sich nicht die Verdichtung der eigenen Fiktionalität zum Ziel setzt" (244; The fictional world of Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* is an impoverished one because it is intended to reflect the reality of the Napoleonic era directly and does not set itself the goal of condensing its own fictionality). My analysis of *Die Hermannsschlacht* highlights the bleak and even nihilistic vision in this ostensibly patriotic work of propaganda. To this end, I showcase Hermann as an anti-hero while also parsing how Kleist's use of language complicates any sense of a pure, ideal vision of a unifying war of liberation. Before delving into Kleist's drama, however, I will elaborate on the connection between the (re)mythologizing *Varusschlacht* and the emergence of early forms of German nationalism/national consciousness.

Tacitus' *Germania*, written around 98 CE, provided one of the earliest known historical compendia of the Germanic peoples. As such, it informed the various literary iterations of the *Varrusschlacht* and of German nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Interestingly, *Germania*

found traction much earlier during the Renaissance when its reception inspired perhaps the earliest wave of nationalistic sentiment amongst Germans. In his book *The Origins of Nationalism*, Caspar Hirschi compellingly argues that the first formations of nationalism are visible long before the emergence of the modern nation-state in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hirschi points towards the German humanists in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Renaissance humanists sought to build and cultivate a scholarly community. As learned individuals and gifted orators, they shaped political discourse. “Helped by the invention of the printing press, humanists fashioned an egalitarian community of learned men that had already implemented the ancient ideals of public deliberation and polite conversation. [...] [H]umanists presented their scholarly community as an expanding sphere, which would eventually transform the whole political culture according to its ideals” (Hirschi, 140-141). Ultimately, Hirschi argues, the humanists sought to create a nation, a *res publica*, a community of highly learned virtuous men who engaged one another in academic and political discourse. “In this sense, it [*res publica*] symbolized an egalitarian and meritocratic commonwealth, whose citizens shared their intellectual treasures, and celebrated and criticized each other publicly” (Hirschi, 141). Hirschi highlights the term *res publica* to accentuate a community that “could be presented as a counter-model to the monarchical governments of most European states” (Hirschi, 141). Via this model, the humanists engaged in an oratory and literary sphere in which they were able to address an imaginary public. It is from these early origins of a burgeoning sense of communal consciousness and discourse that the humanists utilized Tacitus’ *Germania* to form an aggressive anti-Roman Catholic grammar of resistance that established both a legacy and Germanic cultural markers.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> This legacy is perhaps most visible throughout the various renditions of the *Varusschlacht* but it is also evident in the ethnic parameters of “Germanness” spelled out by Fichte, for example. Julia Hell writes in *The Conquest of*

Averse to monarchical governance, German humanist communities sought to curb the power and influence of the Roman Catholic church, especially since the re-establishment of the Curia had increased “Papal appetite for secular power” (Hirschi, 167). To fund the Curia, the church leadership in Rome financially squeezed German territories. This ushered in anti-Roman sentiments amongst German humanist communities. As Hirschi notes, “The German nation, according to these voices, not only had to end its financial bleeding caused by Papal greed, but also needed to protect itself against malign influence from the Italian-dominated Curia” (167). One can therefore trace the emergence of anti-Roman German nationalist discourse to the Early Modern Period, further compounded by the rediscovery of Tacitus’ *Germania* around 1450.

Humanist *Germania* reception established a framework for German nationalist discourse that would continue to be influential well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>96</sup> *Germania* enabled German humanists to conceive of a German nation and bolster burgeoning anti-Roman sentiments via a taxonomy of Germanic cultural values. To be sure, the propagation of Germanic cultural values did not originally stem from a reading of *Germania* itself, but responded to the critical reception of the text by Enea Silvio Piccolomini around 1457. Piccolomini used the text to counter the claims made by German humanists who opposed the Curia. He argued that the *Germani* were, by

---

*Ruins*, “Like Fichte, Kleist was attracted to Tacitus’s *Germania* or *De origine et situ Germanorum* (written ca. 98 CE), the Roman historian’s travel narrative about Germania as the Romans’ dark continent. Tacitus celebrated the simplicity and purity of the German tribes. Living in villages hidden away in their impenetrable forests, they were more virtuous than the Romans living in their decadent cities—in fact, these barbarians were more Roman than the Romans. In their fight against the new Romans, the German freedom fighters responded enthusiastically to this glorification of their barbarous ancestors” (246).

<sup>96</sup> In *Germania*, Tacitus lauds the Germans for “their impressive physical and moral stature. His ethnography established the anthropomorphic caricature that defined the Teutonic stereotype and has dogged the German people ever since” (Chapoutot, 20). Indeed, it is these descriptors of “Germanness” that Hitler would attach to his concept of the Aryan race. Chapoutot continues, “In this context, the Aryan myth conferred on Germany a sense of unity and invincibility with respect to all other nations; the Germans believed theirs was the chosen land of Europe’s Aryan invaders. [...] The myth of the Nordic origins of all civilization would become the ideological foundation of the nationalist and racist movements that sprouted up throughout Germany and Austria in the second half of the nineteenth century. [...] The propaganda literature of these various racist groups, which the young Hitler read voraciously during his indolent, itinerant years in Vienna, formed the bridge that introduced the nineteenth-century Aryan myth to the National Socialist movement” (Chapoutot, 23).

Tacitus' account, "barbarian brutes" and credits the Curia for having civilized the Germanic peoples (Hirschi, 168). In turn, the new reading by German humanists depicted the *Germani* as "unspoilt and unbeaten warriors, leading a simple and virtuous life, needing no written laws, thanks to their good morals, rejecting foreign habits, goods and blood, defending their collective property and singularity, loving freedom and practicing chastity" (169). Indeed, even though, as Hirschi claims, this is a misinterpretation of *Germania* (Tacitus does not claim that the *Germani* were indigenous people of pure blood), these cultural markers would continue to inform the (re)mythologizing of the Arminius saga (Hirschi, 168). If, as Münkler argues, the mythologizing process involves narrative variations, then these narratives are not only retold but augmented to fit a particular political agenda.<sup>97</sup> The German humanists of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were therefore effectively the first to mythologize Tacitus' *Germania* for a German nationalist movement of resistance accompanied by the celebration of said virtuous cultural markers. As Hirschi points out, this is, however, a gross misreading of *Germania*.

By establishing this nationalist interpretation of the *Germania*, German humanists actually misread Tacitus' text [...] They tried to extract a clear message and an unambiguous value judgment from an ethnographic description that refused to draw an explicit conclusion, exercised restraint in moral verdicts and offered ambivalent or even contradicting assessments of both German and Roman culture. However, the nationalist misinterpretation proved so powerful that even modern scholars continued to regard Tacitus' writings as a one-sided account that presented the *Germani* as models of manliness, virtue and independence to a degenerate and enslaved Roman public. (169)

In this light, I argue that Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht*, itself a (re)mythologizing, remains truer to Tacitus than other contemporary depictions of the Arminius saga. *Hermannsschlacht* does not offer a clear moral verdict on the *Germani*; on the contrary, it can be read as a critique. In fact, it

---

<sup>97</sup> "Mit narrativer Variation ist dabei gemeint, dass Mythen nicht bloß weitererzählt, sondern auch fort- und umerzählt werden und dass die dabei zu beobachtenden Variationen spezifisch politische Deutungsleistungen darstellen, in denen einer Neuorientierung des politischen Verbandes vorgearbeitet wird" (Münkler, 15; By narrative variation, we mean that myths are not merely retold, but also continued and retold, and that the variations that can be observed represent specific political interpretations in which a reorientation of the political association is prepared).

is difficult to draw any explicit conclusions. To be sure, *Die Hermannsschlacht* is invested in cultural markers, such as the purity and chasteness [*Keuschheit*] of *Germani* women. On the whole, however, Kleist's depiction of the *Varrusschlacht* is an amalgam of often contradictory sentiments rife with narrative ambiguity, and as such stands in contrast to Kleist's earlier dramas and writings in *Germania*. With the larger nexus of Kleist's anti-occupational literature and with an understanding of relevant peripheral influence having been established, we now delve into an analysis of *Die Hermannsschlacht*.

#### Subversion in *Die Hermannsschlacht*

On the title page, Kleist offers the following distich: "Wehe, mein Vaterland, Dir! Die Leier, zum Ruhm Dir, zu / schlagen, Ist, getreu Dir im Schooß, mir, Deinem Dichter,/ verwehrt" (My Fatherland, alas! The lyre to sing your praises / Is denied me, your poet, faithful here at your bosom).<sup>98</sup> According to Sigurd Burkhardt's article "Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht*: The Lock and the Key," this distich offers the reader a glimpse into Kleist's intent. According to Burkhardt, this intent does not include pro-patriotic sentiments.

[T]he distich is commonly taken to be the poet's bitter plaint that his work has been spurned by the very nation it was meant to glorify. But it says nothing of the sort - almost the contrary. It employs the formula of the scourging prophet's curse: Woe unto thee! In what follows, the fatherland will be sung, but we are not to expect that the song will redound to its glory. ... By the time Kleist concludes his demonstration of what it means to be 'getreu im Schoss' ... every patriotic stereotype will have been called into question. (117)

---

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.kleist-digital.de/dramen/hermannsschlacht/normalisiert> (Accessed 9 March 2025) (Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin)

Read in this light, it would seem Kleist lambasts his nation rather than celebrating it, declaring himself incapable of singing its praises. The question remains, however, how do we reconcile the endorsement of extreme violence throughout Kleist's anti-occupational literature with a simultaneous critique of wanton patriotism?

There is little doubt that the political staging of *Die Hermannsschlacht* mirrors the situation of the German nation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fractured and quarreling Germanic tribes in Kleist's drama closely resemble the fractured and often contentious German *Kleinstaaterei*. The analogy suggests that Kleist seeks to exhort the German *Volk* to oppose the imperial ambitions of the French.

WOLF (*indem. er sich auf dem Boden wirft*).

Es ist umsonst, Thuskar, wir sind verloren!  
Rom, dieser Riese, der, das Mittelmeer beschreitend,  
Gleich dem Koloß von Rhodus, trotzig,  
Den Fuß auf Ost und Westen setzt,  
Des Parthers mutgen Nacken hier,  
Und dort den tapfern Gallier niedertretend:  
Er wirft auch jetzt uns Deutsche in den Staub.<sup>99</sup>

WOLF [throwing himself to the ground].

It's hopeless, Thuskar, everything is lost!  
Like the Colossus of Rhodes, the giant Rome  
Stands defiantly astride the Mediterranean  
With one foot in the East, a second in the West,  
This one on the neck of the brave Parthians,  
The valiant Gauls crushed by the other:  
And now it's the turn of the Germans!<sup>100</sup>

From the outset of the drama, Kleist contextualizes the political conflict, even drawing parallels to the pro-French Rhine Confederacy.

Gueltar, der Nervier, und Fust, der Fürst der Cimbern,  
Erlagen dem Augustus schon;

---

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm11.html> (1.1) (Accessed on 10 March 2025)

<sup>100</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhrâin.

Holm auch, der Friese, wehrt sich nur noch sterbend;  
Aristan hat, der Ubier,  
Der ungroßmütigste von allen deutschen Fürsten,  
In Varus' Arme treulos sich geworfen;<sup>101</sup>

Augustus has already defeated  
Gueltar of the Nervii, and the Prince of the Cimbri, Fust;  
And though Holm the Frisian is still fighting, he's also doomed;  
The most cowardly of the German princes, Aristan the Ubian,  
Has embraced Varus and broken faith with us;<sup>102</sup>

While the political framing is analogous to the German situation around 1800, Kleist's drama obfuscates any clear sense of a morally pure pro-nationalist agenda. Thus, I argue that *Die Hermannsschlacht* is an outlier when compared to Kleist's pro-nationalistic rhetoric in *Germania*. Unlike those texts, *Die Hermannsschlacht* undercuts overtly pro-Prussian nationalism. While the drama is inherently anti-Napoleon and anti-occupation, it does not offer a sanctified vision of a German nation but rather critically envisions a nihilistic political landscape. Stephens writes,

Die Aktualität des Stücks ist auch nach der Schlacht bei Wagram für den Autor selbst ungemindert nicht nur, weil es noch immer gilt, „den allgemeinen Wolf“ [...] Napoleon zu schlagen sondern auch, weil dieser Text der entarteten, von einem „Vatermördergeist“ [...] beherrschten Welt einen Spiegel vorhält, in dem sie sich erkennen sollte. Indem das Stück ausdrücklich mehr als nur eine ästhetische Wirkung erzielen will, ist es mehr nach außen gekehrt als Kleists frühere Dramen, verzichtet es auf das narzißtische Spiel der Modalitäten der Fiktion, das den psychologischen Reichtum von Kleists anderen Dichtungen gewährleistet. (243-244)

Even after the Battle of Wagram, the topicality of the play remains undiminished for the author himself, not only because it is still necessary to defeat “the universal wolf” Napoleon, but also because this text holds up a mirror to the degenerate world, dominated by a “patricidal spirit,” in which it should recognize itself. By explicitly aiming to achieve more than just an aesthetic effect, the play is more outward-looking than Kleist's earlier dramas, dispensing with the narcissistic play of the modalities of fiction that ensures the psychological richness of Kleist's other poems.

---

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm11.html> (1.1) (Accessed on 10 March 2025)

<sup>102</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

Stephens points to what I have described as Kleist's nihilistic attitude, which emerges as the culmination of events that profoundly reshaped his worldview. This attitude is perhaps best demonstrated by the character Hermann himself.

Kleist's depiction of Hermann does not fit the archetypal hero mold. Rather, in many ways, Hermann is an anti-hero. He is willing to burn everything to the ground to accomplish his mission to drive out the Romans. In the third scene of the first act, Hermann holds council with other Germanic tribe leaders after the successful hunt of an aurochs. Threatened by Roman legions under the command of Varus and the ambitions of the Germanic prince Marbod of the Sueven, Hermann, along with other leaders, plans an alliance between the fractured tribes (Cherusci, Katten, Sciambrier, Marsen, and Brukterer). Here, Hermann first explains his willingness to sacrifice everything for liberation.

HERMANN. [...]

Gesamtheit des, was mein sonst war,  
Als ein verlornes Gut in meiner Hand noch ist,  
Das, Freunde, setz ich dran, im Tod nur,  
Wie König Porus, glorreich es zu lassen!  
Ergeben! – Einen Krieg, bei Mana! will ich  
Entflammen, der in Deutschland rasselnd,  
Gleich einem dürren Walde, um sich greifen,  
Und auf zum Himmel lodernd schlagen soll!<sup>103</sup>

HERMANN. [...]

Everything of mine, every last stick and stone,  
The entire entirety of everything I used to own,  
Which is still in my possession, albeit just in name:  
I am willing to stake, my friends, and will only  
Relinquish it like King Porus in glorious death!  
Submit! -I want to fan the flames of war, by Mana!  
To start a fire that sets all Germany ablaze,  
Engulfing all around it like so much dry woodland,  
Its flames licking the very vault of the heavens!<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm13.html> (1.3) (Accessed on 26 March 2025)

<sup>104</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

This declaration is startling; it is an unabashed call for war, and Hermann is ready and willing to sacrifice everything, including all those who are not eager to go to war. While the other tribe leaders have also demonstrated a willingness to engage the Romans, they wish to do so in a measured manner. Hermann's radical determination mirrors a sentiment Kleist expressed in the last chapter of the *Katechismus*.

FRAGE. [...] wenn alles unterginge, und kein Mensch, Weiber und Kinder mit eingerechnet, am Leben bliebe, würdest du den Kampf noch billigen?

ANTWORT. Allerdings, mein Vater.

FRAGE. Warum?

ANTWORT. Weil es Gott lieb ist, wenn Menschen, ihrer Freiheit wegen, sterben.

FRAGE. Was aber ist ihm ein Greuel?

ANTWORT. Wenn Sklaven leben.<sup>105</sup>

QUESTION. [...] if everything were to perish and not a single person, including women and children, remained alive, would you still approve of the fight?

ANSWER. Certainly, my father.

QUESTION. Why?

ANSWER. Because God loves it when people die for their freedom.

QUESTION. But what is an abomination to him?

ANSWER. When slaves live.

Much like father and son in the *Katechismus*, Hermann is willing to sacrifice everything for what he considers a morally righteous cause. He would rather die for his ideals than live as a slave.

This echoes Schiller's lexicon of freedom, but Kleist takes Schiller's love of freedom to an extreme.<sup>106</sup> While in this passage, Hermann is upfront about his willingness to sacrifice everyone and everything, this is a rare moment of honesty. Sean Allen writes,

What matters is not the success or failure of such resistance, but the act of resistance itself. Indeed it is a mark of Hermann's integrity, that at no point does he hold out the prospect of success in order to tempt the others into following his chosen course of

---

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/polschri/chap001.html> (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>106</sup> In *Wallensteins Lager*, siebenter Auftritt. "WACHMEISTER. Wer nichts waget, der darf nichts hoffen." (He who dares nothing, must hope for nothing.) (<https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/wallens1/wall107.html>) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

action; if anything he is unduly pessimistic about his chances of overcoming the Romans.  
(208)

In the context of Kleist's anti-occupation literature, the prioritization of resistance regardless of success or failure rings true. Hermann, however, also engages in dubious activities that undermine any clean-cut notions of morality. In the same scene where Hermann holds council with tribe delegates, he hints at the true end-goal of Germanic emancipation.

HERMANN. Nicht weit? Hm! – Seht, das möcht ich just nicht sagen.  
Nach Rom – ihr Herren, Dagobert und Selgar!  
Wenn mir das Glück ein wenig günstig ist.  
Und wenn nicht ich, wie ich fast zweifeln muß,  
Der Enkel einer doch, wag ich zu hoffen,  
Die hier in diesem Paar der Lenden ruhn!<sup>107</sup>

HERMANN. Not yet very far, you claim? I wouldn't exactly say that.  
To Rome - My fine gentlemen, Dagobert and Selgar!  
If luck is even slightly on my side.  
And if I don't succeed, as I suspect I may not,  
Then one of the descendants  
Waiting in these loins, I dare say, will!<sup>108</sup>

This proclamation extends far beyond freedom from slavery and occupation; Hermann calls for a campaign in which the oppressed become the oppressors. Perhaps in the context of the council, this is intended as a hyperbolic shot of confidence to rile up his compatriots, but the fact that the drama ends with this imperialist vision suggests otherwise. The final lines of *Hermannsschlacht* do not promote violence as a “means to an end” but unveil a grim, nihilistic prospect.

HERMANN. [...]  
Und dann – nach Rom selbst mutig aufzubrechen!  
Wir oder unsre Enkel, meine Brüder!  
Denn eh doch, seh ich ein, erschwingt der Kreis der Welt  
Vor dieser Mordbrut keine Ruhe,  
Als bis das Raubnest ganz zerstört,

---

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm13.html> (1.3) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>108</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

Und nichts, als eine schwarze Fahne,  
Von seinem öden Trümmerhaufen weht!<sup>109</sup>

HERMANN. [...]

And then - Well, then we boldly make for Rome!  
We or our descendants, my brothers!  
Because the world will have no peace  
From this murderous brood  
Until we have fully destroyed the outlaw's lair,  
And nothing remains but a black flag  
Fluttering over its desolate ruins!<sup>110</sup>

The drama concludes with the apocalyptic prospect of a drawn-out conflict that culminates in a black flag fluttering over the rubble. Kleist does not portray a war of liberation in the same optimistic light as Schiller. As Peter Hanenberg puts it, “Hermann’s attitude is radical and absolute. [...] There is no other, no deeper reason for him than the reason of his own self-proclaimed ambition. He is not in service of any transcendent truth but only of his own definition of what seems worthy and achievable to himself” (145). Hanenberg suggests that Hermann’s attitude mirrors Kleist’s predisposition as a writer: *Die Hermannsschlacht*, one of Kleist’s last major works, is indicative of his urgent desire to find an audience. “Kleist was actually a master in setting himself goals and trying out new projects” (Hanenberg, 142). It is certainly plausible that Kleist, in *Die Hermannsschlacht*, is experimenting with different narrative structures and styles. Hanenberg continues,

*Käthchen von Heilbronn* [...] is an experiment in Romanticism, *Penthesilea* an attempt at classicism, *The Broken Jug* an exercise in the illumination of right and reason. We know from Kleist’s stories that none of these approaches could be held effective beyond its own particular demand: what feelings are, what beauty is, how right can be established and truth can be found, is very much a question of viewpoint and of the starting point where the question itself is grounded. Scholars of Kleist’s work widely agree that it represents a permanent search for new solutions, as if its author had been able to establish and

---

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm5j.html> (5.24) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>110</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhrain.

develop multiple points of view. His own position would have been in-between, nowhere, lost in the radicalism, singularity and idiosyncrasy of each of them. [...] [F]or Kleist the nationalistic viewpoint might have been just one more approach to explore and try out. (142)

Stephens makes a similar point:

Darin liegt das provokatorische Moment an der Sprache *der Hermannsschlacht* begründet, das über einen jeglichen Patriotismus weit hinausreicht und vielmehr an einen geläufigen Topos apokalyptischen Denkens grenzt: Erst eine restlos verderbte Welt fordert die rettende Umwälzung heraus. Die Tilgung der Wahrheitsinstanz aus der sprachlichen Welt *der Hermannsschlacht* läßt sich als eine provozierende, wenn schon verzweifelte Strategie begreifen, die erst dann in Wirkung treten sollte, wenn die vordergründige, patriotische Absicht mißlang. (243)

Therein lies the provocative aspect of the language of *The Hermannsschlacht*, which goes far beyond any patriotism and rather borders on a common *topos* of apocalyptic thought: Only a completely corrupted world calls for the saving revolution. The erasure of the authority of truth from the linguistic world of *Hermannsschlacht* can be understood as a provocative, if desperate strategy, which was only to take effect when the superficial patriotic intention failed.

Seen in this light, *Die Hermannsschlacht* reflects the dangers of monomaniacal nationalistic fervor, which is itself a result of Kleist's collapsing worldview: chauvinism leads to an erasure of truth.

From the outset, *Die Hermannsschlacht* unfolds the (de)-evolution of the Germanic emancipatory movement into a form of imperialist conquest of Roman territory. The bleakness of the German situation necessitates a war of deceit, in which Hermann manipulates even those who are closest to him. An obvious pawn in the political chess game is the Roman legate Ventidius, himself a schemer who attempts to turn Hermann against Marbod.

VENTIDIUS. Mein Fürst! Das ist kein Zweifel mehr.  
Glaub nicht, was Meuterei hier ausgesprengt,  
Ein Neffe werd Augusts, sobald es nur erobert,  
In Deutschland, als Präfekt, sich niederlassen;  
[...]  
Ein Deutscher kann das Ganze nur beherrschen!

HERMANN (*vom Thron herabsteigend*).

Nun denn, Legat der römischen Cäsaren,  
So werf ich, was auch säum ich länger,  
Mit Thron und Reich, in deine Arme mich!  
Cheruskas ganze Macht leg ich,  
Als ein Vasall, zu Augusts Füßen nieder.  
Laß Varus kommen, mit den Legionen;  
Ich will fortan, auf Schutz und Trutz  
Mich wider König Marbod ihm verbinden!<sup>111</sup>

VENTIDIUS. Your Highness, there is no doubt about it!

Do not believe the rumours seditious elements are spreading,  
That after the conquest of Germania, a nephew of Augustus  
Will be invested as its prefect;  
[...]  
Only a real German could rule the country as a whole!

HERMANN (descending from his throne).

Well then, legate of the Roman Caesars,  
Why delay? I place myself together with  
My throne and kingdom squarely in your hands!  
Like a vassal I lay the entire might  
Of Cheruscia at Augustus' feet.  
Varus may enter with his legions;  
From now on, I stand together with him  
And against King Marbod!<sup>112</sup>

Of course, neither Ventidius nor Hermann are being truthful; the Romans have no intention of letting a Germanic prince rule the north, and Hermann is not going to sell out his fellow countrymen in servitude to the oppressors. “HERMANN. Da ich nun – *soll* ich einen Oberherrn erkennen,/ Weit lieber einem Deutschen mich,/ Als einem Römer unterwerfen will” (2.10; HERRMANN. Since I—if I must have an overlord,/ Would rather submit to a German/ Than to a

---

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (2.1) (Accessed on 27 March 2025).

<sup>112</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

Roman).<sup>113</sup> While this deception could be viewed as acceptable in the larger political context, Hermann's transgressions in the personal, intimate sphere is not as easily forgiven.

Already in Act I, we are made aware that Ventidius is fond of Hermann's wife, Thusnelda. These two figures are presented in close proximity to one another during an aurochs hunt. Having narrowly escaped the charging animal, Ventidius lauds Thusnelda's steadfastness in the face of danger. "Ihr deutschen Herrn, der Ruhm gehört nicht mir!/ Er kommt Thusnelden, Hermanns Gattin,/ Kommt der erhabenen Cheruskerfürstin zu!" (Act 1, Scene 2; My good German gentlemen, the glory isn't mine./ It belongs to Thusnelda, to Hermann's wife,/ Great princess of the Cherusci).<sup>114</sup> Herrmann is aware that Ventidius is fond of Thusnelda and intends to use this to his advantage. Shortly after this scene, Herrmann and Ventidius hold council, whereupon Ventidius heads for Thusnelda's room. Seizing the opportunity, Herrmann convinces Thusnelda to play into Ventidius' infatuation.

HERMANN. Thuschen!

THUSNELDA. Was gibts?

HERMANN. Geschwind! Ventidius sucht dich.

THUSNELDA. Wo?

HERMANN. Von dem äußern Gang.

THUSNELDA. So? Desto besser.

So bin ich durch den mittlern ihm entflohn.

HERMANN. Thuschen! Geschwind! Ich bitte dich!

THUSNELDA. Was hast du?

HERMANN. Zurück, mein Herzchen! liebst du mich! Zurück!

In deine Zimmer wieder! Rasch! Zurück!

[...]

THUSNELDA. Laß mich mit diesem Römer aus dem Spiele.

[...]

HERMANN. Ich glaub, beim Himmel,

Die römische Tarantel hat –?

Er wähnt ja auch, du Törin, du,

---

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm11.html> (Accessed on 27 March 2025) Translation by Rachel MagShamhrain.

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm11.html> (Accessed 27 on March 2025) Translation by Rachel MagShamhrain.

Daß wir den Wahn der Tat ihm danken!  
Fort, Herzchen, fort!<sup>115</sup>

HERMANN. Thuschen!

THUSNELDA. What is it?

HERMANN. Hurry! Ventidius is looking for you.

THUSNELDA. Where?

HERMANN. He took the outer passage.

THUSNELDA. Indeed? So much the better then.

I managed to avoid him by taking the middle one.

HERMANN. Thuschen! Quickly! I beg you!

THUSNELDA. Why, what's the matter?

HERMANN. Go back, my love! If you love me!

Back! Into your room! Go quickly!

[...]

THUSNELDA: I won't be part of your games with this Roman.

[...]

HERMANN: By God, I think

The Roman tarantula has -?

He also hopes, you fool, that we will be

Eternally grateful to him for his deed!

Go on, my dear, go!<sup>116</sup>

In this exchange, Hermann sets into motion a series of events that will ultimately lead to Ventidius' horrific death at the hands of Thusnelda in what is perhaps the drama's most violent and troubling scene. To accomplish his goal, Hermann manipulates both Ventidius and his own wife. Following the exchange between Hermann and Thusnelda a conversation between Ventidius and Thusnelda transpires that lays bare Ventidius' infatuation and objectification.

VENTIDIUS. Gib eine Locke, Abgott meiner Seelen,  
Von diesem Haupthaar mir, das von der Juno Scheiteln  
In üppigem Wogen nicht zur Ferse wallt!  
Sieh, dem Arminius gönn ich alles:  
Das ganze duftende Gefäß von Seligkeiten,  
Das ich in meinen Armen zitternd halte,  
Sein ists; ich gönn es ihm: es möge sein verbleiben.  
Die einzige Locke fleh ich nur für mich,  
Die, in dem Hain, beim Schein des Monds,

---

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (2.3) (Accessed on 27 March 2025).

<sup>116</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

An meine Lippe heiß gedrückt,  
Mir deines Daseins Traum ergänzen soll!  
Die kannst du mir, geliebtes Weib, nicht weigern,  
Wenn du nicht grausam mich verhöhnen willst.<sup>117</sup>

VENTIDIUS. O my soul's idol, give me a lock  
Of your hair.  
Never did such luxuriant waves  
Cascade from Juno's head to her thighs!  
I do not begrudge Arminius  
That this entire fragrant vessel of pleasures  
That I hold trembling here in my arms  
Belongs to him; He has my blessing. Long may it be his.  
All that I ask for myself is one lock,  
That I may press to my ardent lips  
In a grove by the light of the moon,  
To help me to conjure your presence!  
You wouldn't refuse me this, dear lady,  
Unless you wished to scorn me cruelly.<sup>118</sup>

Here Kleist evokes the tropes of Germanic beauty. Ventidius praises Thusnelda's golden (Germanic) hair, which he obtains without her consent by cutting a lock off when she is not looking. Thusnelda, upon telling Hermann what has just transpired, becomes aware of her role in Herrmann's political schemes.

THUSNELDA (*zuckt die Achseln*).

– Ich weiß nicht, was ich von dir denken soll.

HERMANN. Bei Gott, ich auch nicht. Varus rückt  
Mit den Kohorten morgen bei mir ein. –

THUSNELDA (*streng*).

Armin, du hörst, ich wiederhol es dir,  
Wenn irgend dir dein Weib was wert ist,  
So nötigst du mich nicht, das Herz des Jünglings ferner  
Mit falschen Zärtlichkeiten, zu entflammen.  
Bekämpf ihn, wenn du willst, mit Waffen des Betrugs,  
Da, wo er mit Betrug dich angreift;  
Doch hier, wo, gänzlich unbesonnen,  
Sein junges Herz sich dir entfaltet,  
Hier wünsch ich lebhaft, muß ich dir gestehn,

---

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (2.5) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>118</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

Daß du auf offne Weise ihm begegnest.  
Sag ihm, mit einem Wort, bestimmt doch ungehässig,  
Daß seine kaiserliche Sendung  
An dich, und nicht an deine Gattin sei gerichtet.<sup>119</sup>

THUSNEDLA (*shrugging her shoulders*).  
I don't know what to make of you.

HERMANN. To tell the truth, I don't either. Tomorrow  
Varus and his cohorts will be here.

THUSNELDA (*sternly*).  
Armin, listen, I'll tell you again:  
If your wife means anything to you,  
You will not make her use counterfeit affection  
To enflame this youth's heart any further.  
By all means, should he use deceit against you,  
Respond with your own arsenal of deception;  
But, in this case, where a heart  
Has exposed itself in all its innocence,  
Here, I implore you, do not use  
Weapons against such defencelessness.  
Have a word with him and let him know,  
Firmly but kindly, that his imperial mission  
Involves you and not your wife.<sup>120</sup>

Interestingly, this scene also highlights a moment of self-doubt in Hermann. He is aware that he is manipulating his wife and confesses that he is unsure of what he has become, foreshadowing the even more depraved steps he will take to ensure a German victory over the Romans. As far as Thusnelda's role in Hermann's schemes is concerned, let us further explore the evolution of this deceit.

With news pending of the arrival of Varus, commander of the Roman legions, Hermann seeks to plant seeds of doubt in Thusnelda concerning the conduct and intentions of the Romans. At this juncture, Thusnelda has no reason to hate the Romans as Hermann does; in fact, she

---

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (2.6) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>120</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

offers a voice of reason and humanity throughout the drama. Hermann, however, is convinced that reason and humanity will not advance the German cause. His war of liberation requires that the Germans view the Romans as subhuman, a common strategy in wartime propaganda. To this end, Hermann seeks to convince Thusnelda that the Romans objectify and fetishize Germanic women, telling her that, once they cross the Rhine, they will plunder the hair and teeth of German women.

THUSNELDA. Ach, geh! Du bist ein Affe.

HERMANN. Nun, ich schwörs dir. –  
Wer war es schon, der jüngst beim Mahl erzählte,  
Was einer Frau in Ubien begegnet?

[...]

THUSNELDA. Nein, Lieber! – Daß drei Römer sie, meinst du,  
In Staub gelegt urplötzlich und gebunden –?

HERMANN. Nun ja! Und ihr nicht bloß, vom Haupt hinweg,  
Das Haar, das goldene, die Zähne auch,  
Die elfenbeinernen, mit einem Werkzeug,  
Auf offner Straße, aus dem Mund genommen?

[...]

THUSNELDA (*glühend*).  
Bei allen Rachegöttern! Allen Furien!  
Bei allem, was die Hölle finster macht!  
Mit welchem Recht, wenn dem so ist,  
Vom Kopf uns aber nehmen sie sie weg?

HERMANN. Ich weiß nicht, Thuschen, wie du heut dich stellst.  
Steht August nicht, mit den Kohorten,  
In allen Ländern siegreich aufgepflanzt?  
Für wen erschaffen ward die Welt, als Rom?  
Nimmt August nicht dem Elefanten  
Das Elfenbein, das Öl der Bisamkatze,  
Dem Panthertier das Fell, dem Wurm die Seide?  
Was soll der Deutsche hier zum voraus haben?<sup>121</sup>

THUSNELDA. Such nonsense! What an ape you are!

---

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (3.3) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

HERMANN. But I swear to you.-  
Who was it again who recounted at dinner  
What had happened to a woman in Ubia?  
[...]

THUSNELDA: No, my dear! - That three Romans, if that's what you mean,  
Suddenly threw her to the ground and bound her -?

HERMANN: Just that. And not only did they shave the golden hair  
From her head, but, there, on the open road,  
Used some implement or other to pluck  
The ivory teeth from her mouth.  
[...]

THUSNELDA (*furious*)-.  
By all the gods of vengeance and all the Furies!  
By everything that blackens hell!  
With what right do they, if it is true,  
Plunder our heads in this way?

HERMANN: I really don't know, Thuschen, what's wrong with you today.  
Is Augustus not firmly entrenched  
With his cohorts in all the countries of the globe?  
For whom else was the world made, if not for Rome?  
Does Augustus not take ivory  
From the elephant, oil from the muskrat,  
Fur from the panther and silk from the worm?  
And why should the Germans be treated any differently?<sup>122</sup>

Hermann's propagandizing efforts ultimately convince Thusnelda that the Romans view the Germans as nothing more than animals, animals that they intend to hunt. With this notion planted in Thusnelda's mind, she is primed to exact revenge.

In another act of deceit and treachery, Hermann and fellow Cherusci, disguised as Romans, wreak havoc amongst a Germanic tribe, creating the illusion that the Romans are plundering and setting houses on fire. While we do not know exactly what Hermann does in this scene, one of the following scenes revolves around the body of a young woman who was

---

<sup>122</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

allegedly raped by a Roman and then killed by her own father. Hermann uses this incident to infuriate and unite the Cherusci peoples, thus plunging Germania into war. Although it is not clear in the text if Hermann and a Cherusci accomplice committed this heinous act, I am inclined to believe that Hermann is the culprit. After all, the introduction of the rape victim is preceded by the lines, “Komm, laß uns heimlich durch die Gassen schleichen,/ Und sehn ob uns der Zufall etwas beut” (Come, let’s sneak through the alleys,/ and see if chance brings us anything). In other words, Hermann manufactured consent for war by aiding in the planned assault on a woman, among other violent acts. Clearly, Hermann is a morally dubious figure, not a hero.

When the news spreads that the remaining Roman delegates are to be summarily executed, Thusnelda begs Hermann to spare the lives of those Romans who did not participate in plunder and rape, including Ventidius. At first, Hermann seemingly obliges Thusnelda’s request; then, he gives her a letter allegedly written by Ventidius and addressed to Empress Livia, which was found on a courier bound for Rome. The contents of the letter suggest that Thusnelda’s charitable attitude towards Ventidius is misguided.

THUSNELDA (*liest*).

»Varus, o Herrscherin, steht, mit den Legionen,  
Nun in Cheruska siegreich da;  
Cheruska, faß mich wohl, der Heimat jener Locken,  
Wie Gold so hell und weich wie Seide,  
Die dir der heitre Markt von Rom verkauft.  
Nun bin ich jenes Wortes eingedenk,  
Das deinem schönen Mund, du weißt,  
Als ich zuletzt dich sah, im Scherz entfiel.  
Hier schick ich von dem Haar, das ich dir zgedacht,  
Und das sogleich, wenn Hermann sinkt,  
Die Schere für dich ernten wird,  
Dir eine Probe zu, mir klug verschafft;  
Beim Styx! so legts am Kapitol,  
Phaon, der Krämer, dir nicht vor:  
Es ist vom Haupt der ersten Frau des Reichs,

Vom Haupt der Fürstin selber der Cherusker!«  
– Ei der Verfluchte!  
(*Sie sieht Hermann an, und wieder in den Brief hinein.*)  
Nein, ich las wohl falsch?<sup>123</sup>

THUSNELDA (*reading it*).

“Varus, majesty, with his legions,  
Is now victoriously entrenched in Cheruscia.  
And Cheruscia, you understand, is the home  
Of those locks, bright as gold and smooth as silk,  
That are sold in the lively markets of Rome.  
Well, I recalled the words which,  
You remember, passed your beautiful lips  
In jest when I saw you last.  
And of the hair that I am reserving for you,  
And which, as soon as Hermann falls,  
The shears will harvest for you in full,  
I send you here but a small sample, obtained by ruse.  
By the Styx, you would not get such fine stuff  
From Phaon the merchant at the Capitol!  
It comes from the head of the first lady of this kingdom,  
From the head of the princess of Cheruscia herself.”  
– Ah, the scoundrel!  
(*She looks at Herrmann and then back at the letter.*)  
No, have I misread it?<sup>124</sup>

Bewildered by the contents of the letter, Thusnelda is eager to exact revenge for Ventidius’ egregious betrayal. It would appear that Hermann has successfully manipulated Thusnelda to hate the Romans. He poisoned the mind of his own wife to achieve his political goals.

HERMANN (*beugt sich ganz über sie*).

Heut, wenn die Nacht sinkt, Thuschen,  
Schlägt dir der Rache süße Stunde ja!

THUSNELDA. Geh, geh, ich bitte dich! Verhaßt ist alles,  
Die Welt mir, du mir, ich: laß mich allein!<sup>125</sup>

HERMANN (*leaning over her fully*).

Tonight, Thuschen, when darkness falls,  
The sweet hour of revenge will strike for you!

THUSNELDA. Go, go, I beg you. Everything,

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (4.9) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>124</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (4.9) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

The whole world is odious to me: Leave me alone!<sup>126</sup>

Unlike Tell, who was pushed to his limits and forced into drastic action, Herrmann purposefully manipulates and deceives to achieve his objectives. Thusnelda lures Ventidius into a trap where a wild bear lies in wait. As the bear rips Ventidius to pieces, Herrmann's manipulation of Thusnelda culminates in a horrific death. Thusnelda, however, does not escape unharmed. Herrmann's intrigue has made her a monster. Elisabeth Krimmer notes in her article "The Gender of Terror: War as (Im)Moral Institution in Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* and *Penthesilea*," "Herrmann's wife Thusnelda suffers irrevocable harm. The Thusnelda-Ventidius subplot suggests that violence not only destroys the life of the victim but has serious repercussions for the perpetrator as well" (72). The Ventidius/Thusnelda arch highlights that Herrmann is willing to go to drastic lengths, thus underlining the anti-hero trope, even as it expresses Kleist's violent opposition to the Napoleonic occupation.

Insofar as the Romans are stand-ins for the French, Kleist also shows that some Germans tolerated and even welcomed the French. While Kleist was hostile towards Napoleon and French occupation, others favored collaboration. Seán Allan points out in his chapter "Icons of Resistance: Kleist, the Musée Napoleon, and Queen Luise of Prussia,"

Worse still, from Kleist's point of view, was the fact that many of his contemporaries still openly admired the achievements of Bonaparte and that some leaders, notably those of the states that made up the Confederation of the Rhine (1806-13), believed that their own interests could be best served through some form of involuntary *entente cordiale* with the French Emperor. (165)

In contrast, *Die Hermannsschlacht* rejects material gain in favor of political freedom. Before and, in some areas, even during the occupation, French culture was *en vogue*, literally and figuratively; aristocrats at German courts spoke French, and French fashion set the tone for the

---

<sup>126</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

rest of Europe. The relationship between Thusnelda and Ventidius is exemplary of this occupier-occupied dichotomy. Allan continues,

In *Die Hermannsschlacht*, the female protagonist Thusnelda is proposed as a figure whose radical transformation from an admirer of the gallant Roman legate, Ventidius, into an agent of atavistic revenge who condemns her former lover to a brutal death [...] might be seen as a wake-up call to female members of the Prussian population. (165)

In its embrace of both freedom and naked, brutal revenge, *Hermannsschlacht* presents a muddled vision of Kleist's German nation. On the one hand, the drama is a radical, anti-occupational piece of propaganda; on the other hand, the drama paints a picture of a dystopian, nihilistic future.

As has already been suggested by Krimmer, the violence perpetrated throughout *Die Hermannsschlacht* harms not only the victim but also the perpetrator. Similarly, Tell, is psychologically afflicted by the violence he perpetrates. There is a stark difference, however, between Schiller's portrayal of the violence in his war of liberation and Kleist's bleak vision. This difference is evident when we analyze 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on the supposed transcendental qualities of warfare/violence.

In the introduction to their edited volume *Enlightened War*, Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson summarize the changing nature of warfare from the Early Modern Period through the Enlightenment and beyond. As warfare became a national enterprise, the way it was conducted changed drastically: instead of loose coalitions of mercenary forces engaging in limited campaigns, warfare now relied on a fully mobilized civilian and military apparatus that called on all citizens to participate in or promote the total war effort. Many Enlightenment-era figures ascribed to war a transcendental quality, an ennobling effect. Krimmer and Simpson contrast this elevated concept of war with Kant's theory of eternal peace.

[T]he conceptualization of war as a transcendental, transformative experience was already fully developed in the eighteenth century. Side by side with the debate on eternal peace existed another eighteenth-century tradition that considered war a moral institution and lavished praise on its ennobling features. Tellingly, even Kant himself, who illuminated a template for eternal peace, saw fit to link the experience of war with the notion of the sublime. (7)

When viewed as a moral institution, warfare plays an important role in shaping national consciousness: through war, individuals contribute directly to the nation and define themselves in relation to the nation. This suggests that there is a direct correlation between Enlightenment values (individual rights, freedom, etc.) and the justification of warfare/violence. In other words, there is, as Krimmer and Simpson argue, a “negotiation between Enlightenment ideals of universality [...] about just wars and the inscription of national identity and military conflict into [an] ethical register” (9). As I have shown, this negotiation was evident in Schiller’s *Rebellionskonzept*, and it also informs *Die Hermannsschlacht*.

The works of Kleist I have discussed above link the idea of a German nation to a lexicon of violent rhetoric and actions, even as Kleist, via the same lexicon, offers an egalitarian vision of the nation. Kleist tends to define the “nation” in proximity to resistance rather than via ethnic or linguistic parameters. And yet, while replete with nationalizing rhetoric, *Die Hermannsschlacht* distorts any morally sound notion of a war of liberation by highlighting Hermann’s deception and manipulation. In fact, *Die Hermannsschlacht* subverts Enlightenment concepts of just warfare.

As was previously mentioned, some of Kleist’s seminal works are invested in notions of justice and rights. In *Kohlhaas*, Kleist explores the boundaries of the law, morality, and vigilante justice. Readers sympathize with the protagonist, whose life has been turned upside down by authoritarian thugs. Because Kleist contextualizes Kohlhaas’s morally problematic activities,

readers are reluctant to condemn the character. Such contextualization is missing in Hermann's case. Kleist's antihero ignores justice and morality if they do not suit his ambitions. This is perhaps best illustrated via Hermann's conduct towards prisoners of war.

In the thirteenth scene of the fifth act, the Roman delegate, Septimius, is forced to surrender. Even though he complies, Hermann decrees that he is to be executed.

SEPTIMIUS. Die Götter werden ihre Söhne schützen!  
– Hier ist mein Schwert!

HERMANN (*indem er das Schwert wieder weggibt*).  
Führt ihn hinweg,  
Und laßt sein Blut, das erste, gleich  
Des Vaterlandes dürrn Boden trinken!

(*Zwei Cherusker ergreifen ihn.*)

SEPTIMIUS. Wie, du Barbar! Mein Blut? Das wirst du nicht –!

HERMANN. Warum nicht?

SEPTIMIUS (*mit Würde*).  
– Weil ich dein Gefangner bin!  
An deine Siegerpflicht erinnr' ich dich!

HERMANN (*auf sein Schwert gestützt*).  
An Pflicht und Recht! Sieh da, so wahr ich lebe!  
Er hat das Buch vom Cicero gelesen.  
Was müßt ich tun, sag an, nach diesem Werk?

SEPTIMIUS. Nach diesem Werk? Armsel'ger Spötter, du!  
Mein Haupt, das wehrlos vor dir steht,  
Soll deiner Rache heilig sein;  
Also gebeut dir das Gefühl des Rechts,  
In deines Busens Blättern aufgeschrieben!

HERMANN (*indem er auf ihn einschreitet*).  
Du weißt was Recht ist, du verfluchter Bube,  
Und kamst nach Deutschland, unbeleidigt,  
Um uns zu unterdrücken?

Nehmt eine Keule doppelten Gewichts,  
Und schlagt ihn tot!<sup>127</sup>

SEPTIMIUS. The gods will protect their sons!- Here is my sword!

HERMANN (*handing the sword on*).

Take him away,  
And let his blood, the first, immediately  
Slake the parched soil of the fatherland!

(*Two Cherusci seize him.*)

SEPTIMIUS. What, you barbarian! My blood? You wouldn't -?

HERMANN. And why not?

SEPTIMIUS (*with dignity*).

- Because I am your prisoner!  
Must I remind you of your duties as a victor?

HERMANN (*leaning on his sword*).

Duties and justice! Well, upon my life,  
It would seem he's read his Cicero!  
And what, according to his book, must I do?

SEPTIMIUS. According to his book? You wretched jester!

My head, defenceless before you,  
Should be immune from your revenge;  
As is dictated by the sense of justice,  
Inscribed on the pages of your heart!

HERMANN (*coming at him*).

You know what justice is, blasted scoundrel,  
And yet you come to Germany, unprovoked,  
In order to subjugate us?  
Take a cudgel of double weight  
And strike him dead!<sup>128</sup>

Executing a prisoner, whose only verifiable crime is being part of an occupation force, defies every sense of law and decency. Hermann has clearly crossed a line in his cold condemnation of Septimius. When considered in their entirety, Hermann's actions do not paint a virtuous picture

---

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kleist/hermschl/herm21.html> (5.13) (Accessed on 26 March 2025).

<sup>128</sup> Translation by Rachel MagShamhráin.

of emancipatory action; instead, they present a bleak, nihilistic vision that runs counter to Enlightenment ideals. Galili Shahar notes in their chapter in *Enlightened War*,

Kleist's protagonists are born and destroyed on the fringes of a symbolic order that carried the names of Goethe, Kant, and Napoleon. This is the imagined space "Germany/1800," which is illuminated in his writings as fields of wars and catastrophes. In his works, Kleist creates distorted images of his era—misrepresentations of the Zeitgeist. He tells about the radical conditions of violence and desire. He looks at the ambiguous nature of *Bildung*, education/culture, and exposes the terrible faces of war. (104)

Tellingly, the ending of *Die Hermannsschlacht* prophesies a campaign to Rome that will leave nothing but a black flag flying over rubble. There is no moral message in this image. The drama does not end with a Schillerian peace and a unified, prosperous *Germania* but rather with a continuation of war. Krimmer writes,

Hermann's vision of Germania requires the constant re-affirmation of its reality through sacrifice. Rather than promising that war will cede to the reign of peace, the play suggests that the laws of war will replicate themselves in the order of the new state. Kleist's society truly is the continuation of war by other means. Consequently, *Hermannsschlacht* demonstrates that, although the Germans are the defenders of the fatherland and are as such engaged in a legitimate war, they too, if given half a chance, will embark on an imperial war. (75)

As Krimmer suggests, Kleist does not portray German emancipation as a noble endeavor. Far from presenting a morally righteous rallying cry of resistance, *Die Hermannsschlacht* offers a searing critique.

Kleist's life and literary productions are wrought with conflict and intrigue. His experience in the Prussian military left him unsatisfied. As a student of Enlightenment thought, Kleist engaged with contemporary discourses via his literary productions. Time after time, however, these endeavors fell short of his goals, leaving him more and more distraught and disillusioned. The *Kant Krise* was certainly a pivotal moment in Kleist's authorial development,

further contributing to his disenchantment. Napoleon's conquest of German-speaking territories sparked a flame of patriotic fervor that inspired some of Kleist's most provocative works. The inflammatory language of his ode, "Germania an ihre Kinder" serves as a vitriolic call to arms. While similar sentiments are expressed in the *Katechismus*, the text also proposes a vision of an egalitarian society. Kleist imagines a German nation defined not exclusively by ethnic parameters but instead by its capacity to resist a foreign occupier. His political writings offer a pastiche of, on the one hand, hate-filled, violent rhetoric, and on the other, a vision of a peaceful brotherhood of nations. This paradoxical position, characteristic of his writings, raises more questions than it answers. How do we reconcile the vitriolic rhetoric with Kleist's egalitarian notions? Some scholars have posited that Kleist was experimenting with different literary styles in order to reach a larger audience. Clearly, *Die Hermannsschlacht* is both patriotic propaganda and a critique of warfare and patriotic fervor. As such, Kleist's works not only present a stark contrast to Schiller's model of rebellion but are also highly susceptible to cooption. Kleist's patriotic works expose the German political climate around 1800, demonstrating a tangible shift in nationalistic and patriotic sentiments. Still, it will not do to write Kleist's works off as simply violent nationalist propaganda. As Rachel MagShamhrâin notes, Kleist's nationalism "was a nationalism of a very particular kind, produced by a very specific set of historical circumstances, and as such should not be equated wholesale with other varieties" (xxiii). Indeed, much compelling evidence suggests that Kleist was acutely aware of the dangers of violent chauvinism and perhaps sought to reconcile his disdain for the French, i.e., Napoleon with the egalitarian principles bestowed upon him by Enlightenment thought.

## Conclusion: Remarks on the Trajectory of Nationalism

The constellation of German literary figures I have chosen to survey throughout this dissertation allows insights into emergent ideations of the nation in the long eighteenth century. As this study has shown, this historical period was particularly ripe for the development of the concept of the modern nation-state understood in contemporary terms. In large part, the figures I have analyzed responded to and synthesized many of the core egalitarian tenets of Enlightenment thinking. Some ideations of the German nation were founded upon the same principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that also inspired the era's most influential revolutions. Other conceptualizations of the nation, however, were forged in the face of oppression and occupation, often leading to a more radicalized, exclusionary vision susceptible to xenophobia. As such, the legacy of the nation-building project is prone to engender fear and dislike of anything perceived as foreign or "other". Contemporary usage of the term "nationalism," connoting harmful and exclusionary sentiments, is a testament to this legacy. My objective for this dissertation was not to champion or advocate for nationalism but rather to excavate and examine facets of this phenomenon that are potentially more expressive of egalitarian Enlightenment values—values that are more closely aligned with early 18<sup>th</sup>-century concepts of patriotism as projects of civic engagement and betterment.

Many of the national ideations I have explored do not express enlightened and egalitarian views. Even so, there is much that is conducive to concepts of the "nation" that further the common good. This is perhaps best exemplified by Herder. Johann Gottfried Herder's work concerning the progress and development of humanity and his discussion of nation and nationalism are compelling. His concept of nation stems first and foremost from a desire to foster a linguistic community. Herder was not alone in this. The desire to promote German national

identity via language and culture was shared by many. These desires contributed to and formed early conceptions of national identity and a sense of “nation.” Herder’s treatises on the linguistic cultivation of the nation were informed by the progressive *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment era. His project remained committed to its egalitarian and humanistic ideals. This is perhaps best evidenced by his vehement criticism and rejection of European imperialist transgressions—primarily the plundering and oppression of what we now call the Global South.

Herder’s desire to foster a German linguistic and cultural revival in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century aligns with the era’s humanistically oriented goals of sociopolitical change. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, however, these attitudes would shift into the exclusionary and xenophobic tendencies commonly associated with the term nationalism. This is due, in part, to the occupation of German territories by the French. Herder did not live long enough to bear witness to Napoleon’s (in-)famous pan-European campaigns, and it is impossible to say how he would have responded to this development. However, since he was a staunch opponent of violent conflict and abuses of state power, it stands to reason that Herder would have remained true to the ideals of *Humanität*. Undoubtedly, in the discourse on German nationalism, Herder remains an important and relevant thinker who contributed much to German discourses on the nation and to a burgeoning nationalistic consciousness. The foundation that Herder provided, however, can be misused for political purposes. Otto Dann writes,

Es hängt weitgehend von der politischen Kultur der nationalen Führungsschichten ab, wieweit von nationalistischen Argumenten Gebrauch gemacht wird oder ob die andere Richtung nationaler Argumentation zur Entfaltung kommt, für die in Deutschland z.B. der Name Herders steht. (20)

It largely depends on the political culture of the national ruling classes to what extent nationalist arguments are used or whether the other direction of national argumentation is developed, for which the name of Herder, for example, stands in Germany.

Herder's arguments can be co-opted to champion an exclusionary sense of national identity, one that seeks to delineate "Germanness" via ethnic parameters whilst still founded on a desire for linguistic revival, as is evident in the work of Herder's contemporary, Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Fichte's linguistic theories resemble Herder's—he, too, wished to foster and rejuvenate the German language in hopes of fostering a sense of German national identity. The experience of foreign occupation, however, changed his nationalistically oriented discourse towards exclusionary parameters. Where Herder's idea of "nation" was informed by his theories of *Humanität*, Fichte, in his *Reden*, sought to establish an ethnically delineated brand of "nation." The most striking example of this is found in the fourth address. Here, Fichte explicitly defines the Germans by ethnic parameters. His exclusion of Slavic ethnicities from the German nation anticipates Nazi ideology. Even Fichte, however, also offers more inclusive definitions of the German nation. The seventh address, for example, proposes a radically open assessment of the German nation, stating that all those who believe in the eternal development of "*Geistigkeit*" [spirituality] and the "*Freiheit dieser Geistigkeit*" [freedom of this spirituality], belong to the German nation, regardless of language or ethnicity.

While Fichte and Herder share similar views on language and a desire to foster a *Kulturnation*, Fichte's theoretical construct of the nation is clearly more exclusionary. And while it is understandable that the French occupation influenced his thinking and his rhetoric, his notion of the nation remains problematic. Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to nationalistic ideations that give rise to exclusionary or chauvinistic attitudes as "slippages." By this, I suggest that one can witness how nationalism and patriotism start to slip into harmful and toxic ideologies. Yet, Fichte is inconsistent at best. Parts of his *Reden* remain committed to egalitarian causes, while others promote xenophobic ideologies. And while both Herder and

Fichte are still much discussed in academic discourse surrounding nationalism, Herder's idea of the nation remains truer to the humanistic goals of the Enlightenment and can point us towards a more equitable future.

Contributing to a concept of *Kulturnation*, Schiller also developed ideas of a German nation—predominantly via his aesthetic theories, which included the idea of a *Menschenrepublik*. Where Fichte and Herder were concerned with linguistic cultivation, Schiller focused much of his efforts on exploring the potential benefits of an aesthetic education on the body populace. I argue that Schiller's project aligns with theories of a communally oriented patriotism, as laid out by Primoratz, as well as with the progressive nationalist movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Schiller, by and large, centered his historical dramas on political and social revolutions. He was undoubtedly captivated by the era's revolutionary fervor. His dramas and poetry largely express patriotic sentiments, rooted in the common good, as part of the nation-building/imagining process. Schiller was particularly concerned with abuses of tyrannical governments. In *Wilhelm Tell*, he imagines a highly idealistic, nearly bloodless rebellion that ends with an enlightened aristocracy ceding to the democratic demands of the citizenry. Schiller believed that only an aesthetic education could bring about such an ideal state, in which members of both the upper and lower classes would be transformed through exposure to beauty and freedom in expression. Schiller's ideas in this regard are emblematic of the Enlightenment era's most idealistic values and, as such, contributed to an idea of a German nation as a *Menschenrepublik*. I have argued that, in this, Schiller's vision is aligned with the egalitarian ideals of the Enlightenment and certainly worthy of further consideration. However, Schiller's project also promotes problematic ideas.

As a staunch opponent of tyrannical rulers, Schiller evokes the trope of a just war or rebellion throughout his works. In many ways, he glorifies violence, presenting it as necessary and warranted. This is highlighted by Elisabeth Krimmer in *The Representations of War in German Literature*: “In accordance with eighteenth-century philosophy, Schiller differentiates between just (*bellum iustum*) and unjust wars. [...] Repeatedly, Schiller celebrates the soldier of freedom who dies a glorious death for his fatherland and expresses his admiration for heroic leaders who laugh death in the face” (28). While Schiller does portray violence as a necessary tool to shake off the fetters of tyranny, I maintain that his national imaging is aligned with contemporary egalitarian discourses on the nation. It is true that Schiller embraces the *topos* of warfare as ennobling, but he is also, as Krimmer points out, “acutely aware of the devastation that war wreaks on society and insists that cruelty and corruption form an integral part of every war” (28). In this, he resembles Kleist, whose vitriolic and nationalistic writings simultaneously promote, subvert, and criticize the same patriotic sentiments that can and have been used to fuel military campaigns.

My analysis of Kleist’s writings focuses primarily on works that seek to stoke the flames of German patriotism. Kleist sought to infuse the burgeoning German national identity with strong anti-occupational rhetoric. Many of his works were slotted for publication in his political journal *Germania* and, while this journal failed to reach a broad audience, its contents are marked by strong anti-French sentiments. When examined in conjunction with *Die Hermannsschlacht*, one cannot ignore Kleist’s overtly hostile and violent imagery. Indeed, from the outset, his works are marked by language that is susceptible to the pitfalls of xenophobic and chauvinistic forms of nationalism and patriotism. Even so, I argue that, upon closer inspection, Kleist both promotes and subverts reactionary nationalistic ideologies. There is no doubt that

Kleist vehemently disliked Napoleon and the French occupational forces and that his call to savage violence in resisting the occupation is problematic. But along with the promotion of a politics of slaughter, there is also a great deal of nuanced political critique.

A closer examination of *Die Hermannsschlacht* reveals that Kleist is acutely aware of the dangers inherent in nationalistic fervor. Much scholarship supports the notion that Kleist did not fully abandon the progressive Enlightenment doctrines that shaped his upbringing and schooling. In line with these arguments, I have demonstrated, primarily through readings of Kleist's correspondence, that he abhorred military institutions and was all too aware of the destructive nature of warfare. Far from championing state-sanctioned violence, he warns against its corruptive influence and destructive consequences. In many ways, Kleist mirrors Herder's strong anti-imperial and colonial sentiments. Indeed, much evidence supports the argument that Kleist can be read as a proponent of progressive Enlightenment values, even if his subversive, oblique style obscures his message and facilitates the co-optation of his works by xenophobic nationalist movements. Kleist's idea of the nation is highly complex and easily misunderstood. On the hand, he demonstrates a commitment to progressive ideals; on the other, his violent anti-occupational rhetoric lays itself open to dangerous slippages.

The constellation of German nationalistic ideations thus presented throughout this dissertation demonstrate what I believe to be an array of different approaches, reactions, and methodologies to the question of what it means to be German circa 1800. And while I am aware the selected authors themselves are not representative of particular groups (women, Jews, people of color, etc.) I believe they nonetheless contribute to a nuanced view of nation.<sup>129</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Much more could be said about these particular groups and their national imaginings. Here, my dissertation serves as an introductory analysis of this deep and complex topic.

century is also particularly fruitful for the analysis of our contemporary understanding of nationalism and the nation-state. Thus, by examining the emergence of the nation-state throughout 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe I hope to have also shed light on the development of German national consciousness during this time.

Nationalism as a concept, however, predates the development of the nation-state—it is nationalism which engenders the nation and not the other way around—and as such I have also explored earlier conceptions of nation which extend beyond the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reaching as far back as Tacitus' *Germania* written around 98CE. The idea of nation, and who does/does not belong, is ever changing and continues to present challenges well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the nation-state remains today the predominate form of social and political organization, nationalism will continue to influence both domestic and international policy. Unfortunately, these feelings and policies are almost always to the detriment of minority groups who do not conform to any given national imagining. Although I have also explored a range of theories supporting progressive forms of nationalism, nationalism today, remains by and large a blight on any otherwise progressive social and or political formations. The impetus for undertaking this project was largely influenced by a desire to further understand the contemporary forms of wanton and volatile nationalistic and patriotic discourse which remains pervasive.

An analysis of the historical development of German discourses on nationalism is particularly relevant for an understanding of the phenomenon as it exists in the West today. As fascism is once again rearing its ugly head, it is extremely important to understand how nationalist movements can descend towards abhorrent and destructive ends. In light of these developments, I am extremely critical of nationalistic sentiments. I also acknowledge, however, that nationalism and patriotism can be important tools not only in forging a national identity but

also in gaining national sovereignty—this is particularly true for marginalized groups that are often the victims of oppression. This dissertation was thus intended to explore and unpack some of the progressive and egalitarian doctrines of the Enlightenment era that influenced many of Germany’s literary figures. The nation-state will likely persist as the primary form of social and political organization and, as such, we must continue to contend with nationalism in all of its forms. Consequently, it is important to bear in mind that many prominent German figures, such as those whom I have examined in this dissertation, offer a more inclusive and egalitarian, if not idealistic and hopeful, idea of what a nation can be.

## Bibliography

- Abizadeh, Arash. "Was Fichte an Ethnic Nationalist? On Cultural Nationalism and its Double." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2005, pp. 334–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26221698>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2023.
- Adler, Hans, and Wulf Köpke, editors. *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*. Camden House, 2009.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.
- Allan, Seán. *The Plays of Heinrich von Kleist: Ideals and Illusions*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Allan, Seán, and Jeffrey L. High, editors. *Inspiration Bonaparte?: German Culture and Napoleonic Occupation*. Camden House, 2021.
- Beiser, Frederick C. *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination*. Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Berlin, Isaiah, and Henry Hardy. *The Roots of Romanticism*. 2nd ed., Princeton UP, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400846696>.
- . *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Edited by Henry Hardy, 2nd ed., foreword by Jonathan Israel, Princeton UP, 2013.
- Borchmeyer, Dieter. "'Altes Recht' und Revolution. Schillers *Wilhelm Tell*." *Friedrich Schiller. Kunst, Humanität und Politik in der späten Aufklärung. Ein Symposium*, edited by Wolfgang Wittkowski, Tübingen, 1982, pp. 69–113.
- Breuer, Ingo. *Kleist-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*. Metzler, 2009.

- Broadie, Alexander. "Scottish Philosophy in the 18th Century." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/scottish-18th/>.
- Bronner, Stephen Eric. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2017.
- Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. 1790, <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/burke/revfrance.pdf>. Accessed 2 June 2024.
- Burkhardt, Sigurd. "'Kleist's Hermannsschlacht': The Lock and the Key." *The Drama of Language: Essays on Goethe and Kleist*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1970.
- Chapoutot, Johann. *Greeks, Romans, Germans : How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*. Translated by Richard R. Nybakken, University of California Press, 2016.
- Clark, Robert. "Herder's Concept of *Humanität*." *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, edited by Hans Adler and Wulf Köpke, Camden House, 2009.
- Dann, Otto. *Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland, 1770-1990*. Originalausg., Beck, 1993.
- Davidson, Ian. *The French Revolution: From Enlightenment to Tyranny*. Pegasus Books, 2016.
- Eggel, Dominic, et al. "Was Herder a Nationalist?" *The Review of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2007, pp. 48–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452851>.
- Fink, Gonthier-Louis. "Schillers *Wilhelm Tell*, ein antijakobinisches republikanisches Schauspiel." *Aufklärung*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1986, pp. 57–81.

- Finlayson, James Gordon, and Dafydd Huw Rees. "Jürgen Habermas." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/habermas/>.
- Forster, Michael. "Johann Gottfried von Herder." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/herder/>.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Cornell UP, 1983.
- Haller-Neveermann, Marie, and Dieter Rehwinkel, editors. *Kleist – ein moderner Aufklärer?* Wallstein, 2005.
- Hanenberg, Peter. "Nationalism on Stage: Kleist's Drama *Die Hermannsschlacht*." *Ossian and National Epic*, Peter Lang, 2012.
- Hell, Julia. *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome*. U of Chicago P, 2019.
- Herbst, Hildburg. "Recht auf Widerstand: Pflicht zum Widerstand: Der Fall *Wilhelm Tell*." *German Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1998, pp. 429–45.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*. Hartknoch, 1774.
- . "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity (1774)." *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Michael N. Forster, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 272–358.
- . *Ueber die neuere Deutsche Litteratur*. Bd. 1, Riga, 1767, p. 55. *Deutsches Textarchiv*, [https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/herder\\_litteratur01\\_1767/59](https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/herder_litteratur01_1767/59). Accessed 9 May 2022.

- . *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur: Erste Sammlung von Fragmenten*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/books/über-die-neuere-deutsche-literatur-erste-sammlung/docview/2371639398/se-2>.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried, and Bernhard Suphan. *Herders Sämtliche Werke: Zurückbehaltene und abgeschnittene Briefe 1792–97*. 18th ed., G. Olms, 1967.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried, and Gunter E. Grimm. *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 4. Schriften zu Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Altertum 1774–1787*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried, and Hans Dietrich Irmscher. *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 7. Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried von. *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, edited by Heinrich Düntzer. 1792–1797. *Projekt Gutenberg*, <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/herder/humanita/chap001.html>. Accessed 16 May 2025.
- . *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Michael N. Forster, Cambridge UP, 2002.
- . *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Edited by Martin Bollacher, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.
- Herrmann, Hans Peter, u. a. *Machtphantasie Deutschland : Nationalismus, Männlichkeit und Fremdenhass im Vaterlandsdiskurs deutscher Schriftsteller des 18. Jahrhunderts*. 1. Aufl., Suhrkamp, 1996.
- High, Jeffrey L., et al., editors. *Who is this Schiller now?: Essays on His Reception and Significance*. Camden House, 2011.

- Hirschi, Caspar. *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany*. Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Hubrig, Hans. *Die patriotischen Gesellschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Verlag Julius Beltz, 1957.
- Jansen, Uwe. Afterword. *Wilhelm Tell: Schauspiel*, by Friedrich Schiller, edited by Uwe Jansen, Reclam, 2014.
- Johnson, Robert, and Adam Cureton. "Kant's Moral Philosophy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/>. Accessed 25 June 2024.
- Kaufmann, Hans A. *Nation und Nationalismus in Schillers Entwurf "Deutsche Größe" und im Schauspiel "Wilhelm Tell": Zu ihrer kulturpolitischen Funktionalisierung im frühen 20. Jahrhundert*. P. Lang, 1993.
- Keohane, Oisín. "The Metaphysics of Nationalism: Fichte and the German Language as a National Philosophical Idiom." *Cosmo-Nationalism: American, French and German Philosophy*, Edinburgh UP, 2018, pp. 92–115. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqxtxq.7>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2023.
- Kleist, Heinrich von, and Rachel MagShamhráin. *The Battle of Herrmann: A Drama*. Königshausen & Neumann, 2008.
- Kleist, Heinrich von. "Briefe an Ulrike v. Kleist, 12. Nov. 1799." *Kleist Digital*, <https://kleist-digital.de/briefe/006>.
- Krimmer, Elisabeth, and Patricia Anne Simpson. *Enlightened War : German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*. Camden House, 2011.

- Krimmer, Elisabeth. "The Gender of Terror: War as (Im)Moral Institution in Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* and *Penthesilea*." *The German Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2008, pp. 66–85.
- . *The Representation of War in German Literature : From 1800 to the Present*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Miscevic, Nenad, "Nationalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/nationalism/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/nationalism/).
- Moland, Lydia L. "Friedrich Schiller." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/schiller/>.
- Moggach, Douglas. "Schiller's Aesthetic Republicanism." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 520–41. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26222656>. Accessed 30 May 2024.
- Münkler, Herfried. *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*. 5th ed., Rowohlt, 2009.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. "On the Origins of Constitutional Patriotism." *Patriotism*, Routledge, 2008, pp. 103–20. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315599724-11>.
- Patten, Alan. "'The Most Natural State': Herder and Nationalism." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2010, pp. 657–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26224133>. Accessed 3 May 2022.

- Piirimäe, Eva. "Berlin, Herder, and the Counter-Enlightenment." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2015, pp. 71–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24690268>. Accessed 2 May 2022.
- Primoratz, Igor, "Patriotism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/patriotism/>. Accessed 10 July 2025.
- Richter, Simon. *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*. Camden House, 2005.
- Schiller, Friedrich. "Das Lied von der Glocke." *Gedichte*, <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schiller/gedichte/chap150.html>. Accessed 20 May 2025.
- . *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, edited by Julius Petersen et al., Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1943–.
- . *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*. Hoffenberg, 2016.
- . *Wilhelm Tell: Schauspiel*, edited by Uwe Jansen, Reclam, 2014.
- Schmidt, Royal J. "Cultural Nationalism in Herder." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1956, pp. 407–17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707552>. Accessed 3 May 2022.
- Schulze, Hagen. *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck, 1763–1867*. Translated by Sarah Hanbury-Tenison, Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Sikka, Sonia. *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*. Cambridge UP, 2011.

Spencer, Vicki. "In Defense of Herder on Cultural Diversity and Interaction." *The Review of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2007, pp. 79–105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452852>.

Accessed 16 May 2025.

Spicer, Michael W. "Herder on Cultural Pluralism and the State: An Examination of His Views and Their Implications for Public Administration." *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2000, pp. 309–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25611435>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2022.

Stephens, Anthony R., and Walter Müller-Seidel. *Kleist: Sprache und Gewalt*. Rombach, 1999.

Stewart, Rebecca, et al., editors. *Heinrich von Kleist: Literary and Philosophical Paradigms*. Camden House, 2022.

*The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 1994.

Tolstoy, Leo, "On Patriotism" and "Patriotism, or Peace?" *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987.

van der Laan, J. M. "Johann Gottfried Herder on War and Peace." *Monatshefte*, vol. 101, no. 3, 2009, pp. 335–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20622213>. Accessed 16 May 2025.

Walker, John. "Wilhelm von Humboldt and Dialogical Thinking." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016.

Wertz, William F., Jr. "A Reader's Guide to Letters on the Aesthetical." *Fidelio*, vol. 14, nos. 1–2, Spring–Summer 2005.

Zhang, Chunjie. *Transculturality and German Discourse in the Age of European Colonialism*. Northwestern UP, 2017.