H-German Roundtable on Smith, Germany: A Nation in Its Time Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000

Discussion published by Matthew Unangst on Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Introduction

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Once in a while a new book comes along with a scope so ambitious that a single review does not seem to do it justice. It quickly became clear to us at H-German that Helmut Walser Smith’s latest tome on the gestation of German national identity in the modern period falls into that rarefied category. We therefore set about organising a book forum dedicated to Germany: A Nation in Its Time Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000 but quickly discovered that Karen Hagemann and her fellow hosts of the North Carolina German Studies and Workshop Seminar (NCGS) had hit on the same idea. The convergence of our plans turned out to be a golden opportunity to hold the book forum on an even grander scale. Following Karen’s gracious invitation to work together, we invited John Breuilly, Terence McIntosh, Konrad Jarausch, and Eve Rosenhaft to reflect on the arguments laid out in Germany in a two-stage process. The first consisted of a virtual discussion hosted by NCGS on 24 September 2021. In a second step, we are hereby disseminating the results to the wider community via H-German. We are grateful to Smith – ever the masochist – for agreeing to respond to the commentaries of our panellists on both occasions.

In Germany, Smith sets out to reframe the history of German nationalism. Rather than focus on the rather recent history of the unified nation-state, he tells the story of the idea of a German nation that predated nationalism, moved through an age of nationalism, and has been remade after the collapse of German nationalism in 1945. Germany furnishes an English-language contribution to a wave of books recently published which complicate the historical narratives at the heart of today’s conversations about German politics and identity. As Smith explains in his conclusion, the book is in part a response to the resurgence of an aggressive German nationalism over the last decade, positing a more benign vision of the nation than that presented by PEGIDA and the AfD. Compared to other new scholarly interventions by Heinrich August Winkler, Hedwig Richter, and Dieter Langewiesche, Smith’s book is less concerned with political formations, which perhaps reflects the Anglo-American audience, and also less concerned with the specifics of German political structures in the twenty-first century. Moreover, unlike the last English-language grand narrative of German history, William Hagen’s 2012 magisterial German History in Modern Times, he traces the roots of nationalism as far back as the sixteenth. In so doing, Smith’s volume develops three main arguments, namely that the meaning of the German nation has changed over time, that Germany has been at peace more often than it has been at war, and that empathy toward excluded social or religious groups has initiated processes of integration in the national community.

A book of Germany’s scope inevitably raises important questions. To probe these, we asked experts conversant with the entire chronological arc and possessing pertinent specialist knowledge in the theory of nationalism, gender history, religion, and the epistemology of history to share their perspectives. All reviewers concur in their praise for the impressive breadth and elegance of Smith’s
synthesis of five hundred years of history. The freshness of his approach comes to the fore in minor aspects such as the innovative use of GIS maps to demonstrate how early modern Germans imagined the nation. Yet our experts also make critical observations which relate to the larger issue of how to weight the relative importance of certain events, actors, and phenomena. For instance, McIntosh draws attention to the Habsburg empire’s role in the process of defining Germany; John Breuilly makes a case for the watershed moment of 1848; Rosenhaft poignantly asks whether the protagonists of Smith’s story always reflect the more inclusive vision of the German nation he himself indicates a desire to promote; and Konrad Jarausch critiques the relatively short shrift given to post-1945 events, particularly the little space given to discussions of the GDR in Germany. An overarching question that emerges, finally, from the comments concerns the purpose of the book and its intended readership. Jarausch and Rosenhaft note a shift in tone to a straightforward survey of German history once the discussion reaches the process of unification. This gear change owes something to the pedagogical mission the author has set himself. As his contribution to the book forum below explains, by foregrounding the crimes of the Nazi era (in keeping with his earlier publications), he wishes to honour an “intellectual and emotional attachment” to the victims of the Holocaust as well as to “reach a younger generation of Germans who are more at ease with the nation than my generation of Germans.” Necessary as the injunction not to forget the lessons of the Holocaust in the face of resurging nationalism is, its toll on the narratological consistency of the book is arguably redundant, for the nuanced, erudite pitch of the book speaks to an audience with prior knowledge and already existing sensitivity to the pathologies of German nationalism, rather than young AfD voters.

Such caveats notwithstanding, the fact that Smith has managed to provoke so many significant questions from such esteemed historians is indicative of the timeliness of his work. Germany succeeds in encouraging new thinking beyond the vanishing point of the Nazi period, throwing into relief the contingencies of conceptualizing the German nation and more optimistic alternatives for what Germany might be. In short, it provokes the reader to think about the continued importance of a deep historical view for understanding Germany today.

Roundtable

Terence McIntosh, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

As one would expect of an exceedingly accomplished historian, Helmut Smith has produced a superb new book. Gracefully written, brimming with erudition, and possessing an intellectually gripping and powerful narrative arc that elegantly bridges Germany’s early modern and modern histories, Germany: A Nation in Its Time also repeatedly rouses the reader to serious reflection. Regarding the first half of the book, such reflection should perhaps focus on three principal issues: the German nation in the first half of the sixteenth century, the muted theme of compassion during the German Enlightenment, and a comparison of the geopolitical outcomes, on the eve of the French Revolution, of three centuries of state building in the Habsburg and Hohenzollern lands. Each issue touches on one of the three major arguments in Germany: A Nation in Its Time that are outlined in its introduction.

In chapter 1, Smith presents an engaging discussion of German cartographers and their maps of
Germany in the decades around 1500. This somewhat unusual starting point not only introduces an important thread that runs through the entire work, namely the cartographic presentation of historical evidence, but also allows the author to sidestep the messy political affairs that gave form to the early modern German nation. Precisely in these decades the term *Nationis Germanicae* made its debut, appearing first in 1456 in the phrase *Gravamina nationis germanicae*, the grievances of the German nation against the papacy, and then in official documents from the chanceries of Emperors Frederick III and Maximilian I. Moreover, in these decades the early modern nation acquired important and enduring political institutions: the Imperial Diet, the Imperial Chamber Court, and the Imperial Circles, which divided most of the Holy Roman empire (including Savoy and the Burgundian lands, where non-German populations predominated, but not the Lands of the Bohemian Crown) into six and then ten jurisdictions. In the decades around 1500, the machinery of imperial government began to function.

Complicating this development is the fact that the Habsburg rulers at the time, Emperors Maximilian I and Charles V, pursued an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy that affected the way neighboring nations regarded the German polity. Although the purpose of this foreign policy was not to further aims specific to an early modern German nation but to establish a universal Christian monarchy and thus realize a medieval political ideal, the emperors relied heavily on German military manpower, fearsome landsknechts, as well as redoubtable Swiss-German mercenaries. Maximilian invaded northern Italy in 1496, 1508, and repeatedly between 1509 and 1516. Soon after the imperial election in 1519, Charles V was waging war there. His overwhelmingly German troops won the battle of Pavia and captured the French king in 1525; two years later they sacked the city of Rome, murdering between six and twelve thousand residents and pillaging for eight months. The purpose of mentioning these salient instances of Habsburg belligerency is not to challenge the second of the three major arguments in Smith’s book, namely that over the *longue durée* Germany tended to be at peace much more often than at war. His point is indisputable. Nevertheless, it is a notable irony that the din of battle resounded at the inception of the early modern nation. However, in order to establish in the book’s first chapter the undisputed importance of cartographic evidence, Smith has chosen to set aside war and political matters. It is a trade-off with some cost, but certainly not a Faustian bargain.

In discussing the Enlightenment and Romanticism from 1770 to 1815, Smith shifts from focusing on maps, representations of Germany’s geographic surface, to pondering poetry and thus exploring Germany’s interior, or soul. In brief and insightful discussions of writings in the 1770s by Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Wolfgang Goethe that focus on their attempts to draw closer to ordinary German people, Smith, invoking the eminent literary scholar Eric Auerbach, suggests that the authors were also expressing an awareness that the low-born can receive tragic representation. In doing so, Smith touches on the last of the three major arguments outlined in the book’s introduction, namely that the ability to express compassion toward certain social or religious groups—the low-born—reflects a sense of acceptance of the group within the nation.

Without denying the importance of poetry and literary representations, one might argue that this sense of compassion manifested itself in other important and more immediate ways. During the German Enlightenment, theology, particularly Protestant theology, was a major subject of discussion, and Johann Joachim Spalding, the leading neologist in the early 1770s, was formulating a form of popular theology, one that the common man and woman would find more accessible than hoary confessional controversies. Neology, with its emphasis on the pastor’s need to speak understandably...
to simple folk instead of preaching incomprehensibly about arcane doctrinal disputes, moved in this
direction. More broadly, some scholars have identified for the period from 1770 to 1790 a broad
“popular Enlightenment,” or Volksaufklärung. Its thrust was to reach the common people, especially
rural folk, directly with useful advice that would meaningfully improve their condition. A rich variety
of writings appeared that first focused on the economic welfare of peasants but, within a few years,
addressed a broader range of topics, including improvements in basic medical care, enlightened
religious instruction, and even, to a limited degree, law, politics, and history. Smith is absolutely
correct to regard the collection of folk songs and the writing of travel journals by figures like Herder
and Goethe as reflections of a growing cultural interest in ordinary people, but these activities alone
do not capture the depth and intensity with which a broad range of Enlightened writers were trying
to bridge the social chasm that separated them from the rural population.

The final reflection concerns the extent to which the outcomes of Prussian and Austrian state building
and territorial expansion in the early modern period appear to prefigure Germany’s nineteen-century
unification by Prussia. Although Smith comments only briefly on this matter, it does relate to the first
major argument that he sketches in the introduction—namely that there are “radically different ways
of knowing, representing, and experiencing the German nation” and that “[nations] are real or true in
different ways in different periods” (xi). In this particular instance, one might ask whether the
distinctly different legacies of the two states reinforced the growing support in some political camps
since the 1830s for Prussian orchestration of the creation of a new nation.

A series of successes and only a few setbacks marked Austrian Habsburg state building from the late
fifteenth to the early eighteenth century. Treaties with France in 1482 and 1493 gave Maximilian I
the Netherlands and the Free County of Burgundy. In 1526, the Austrian Habsburgs regained
possession of the kingdom of Hungary and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. The Ottoman Turks
restricted the scope of Habsburg rule over the Hungary in the sixteenth and much of the seventeenth
centuries, but in the decades after 1683 the Habsburgs extended their control eastward to
Transylvania. And although the Spanish Habsburgs governed the Netherlands since 1555, these
territories (minus the Dutch Republic), as well as much of Italy, came under Austrian rule in 1714 at
the conclusion of the War of the Spanish Succession.

But in the following decades the setbacks outweighed the successes. The Habsburg monarchy
surrendered a major portion of its Italian territories to Bourbon Spain in the 1730s, lost almost all of
Silesia to Prussia in the 1740s, failed to bring to fruition after 1777 its plans for acquiring Bavaria in
exchange for the Austrian Netherlands, and stood aside during the Second Partition of Poland. When
Emperor Joseph II died in 1790, centrifugal forces were threatening to dismember the monarchy. In
short, the sprawling Habsburg state, with lands reaching from the North Sea to the eastern and
southern Carpathians and encompassing a considerable variety of ethnic groups, manifested some
consequential geopolitical weaknesses and at times could not adequately defend itself against the
aggressions of rival powers.

By contrast, repeated successes marked Prussian state building in the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. Beginning with the expansion of Hohenzollern rule in 1618 from Brandenburg to ducal
Prussia in the east and some Rhineland provinces in the west, Berlin then acquired through the Peace
of Westphalia the eastern half of the duchy of Pomerania, the principality of Halberstadt and two
other secularized prince-bishoprics, and the right of succession to the duchy of Magdeburg. Prussia
seized most of Silesia in the early 1740s, miraculously lost no territory in the Seven Years’ War, and then began an eastward expansion with the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. Toward the end of eighteenth century, Prussia was less of a multiethnic state than Austria in so far as Prussia’s non-Germans were overwhelming Polish (and not Walloon, Flemish, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and Romanian).

Napoleon mauled both states with equal severity, but after his fall the great power rivalry between Prussia and Austria temporarily subsided. When it heated up again, however, the question of whether the southern states in the German Confederation should cooperate closely with either Prussia or Austria in matters of military security acquired considerable urgency and influenced the larger debates about unification. It is tempting to imagine that when nationalists pondered this question, they not only considered the relevant security issues in the middle third of the nineteenth century but also reflected on Prussia’s and Austria’s different legacies from the eighteenth.

John Breuilly, London School of Economics

I will keep my remarks short as I have posted a long review of Helmut Smith’s book on H-German. This is a superb book pursuing, over half a millennium, themes of nation/nationalism, war/peace, and the growth of empathy. Here I focus critically on the central theme: the relationship between the long history of nation and short history of nationalism, itself divided into “an age of nationalism” when this was a minority sentiment, and “the nationalist age” when it was dominant.

Smith identifies three long-run meanings of nation: place, people, experience. Smith’s account of Germany as place is based on innovative research into maps. Inevitably many questions are raised. Germania as the designation of a region dates back to the Roman Empire; an imperialist view shaped by Graeco-Roman ethnographic assumptions. Rome’s prestige ensured its naming practices long survived the empire, notably in the title “Holy Roman Empire,” to which was later added “of the German Nation.” Other Roman names such as “Francia” and “Italia” named other regions.

“Germans,” meaning the inhabitants of Germania, was also used by Romans – notably Tacitus – and linked to ethnic stereotypes. In more recent times, with more information, we can distinguish between how, for example, British imperialists named and described the “tribes” they encountered in sub-Saharan Africa, and how those people conceived of themselves and the territories they inhabited.

Smith’s account includes German cartographers and writers rejecting the stereotypes of Tacitus, instead depicting elite types (nobles, merchants, etc.), while reserving ethnic stereotypes for comic lower class figures. In relation to the theme of extended empathy, Smith does note increasingly informed and sympathetic portrayals of “ordinary” people. However, only by the 18th century does one encounter positive images “…of the simple, rural Volk as standing for, and representing, the best of the nation.” [89]

For German “experiences,” Smith focuses on the Thirty Years War. However, the accounts he cites –by German writers – seem to me to portray Germans not as active, self-conscious members of a nation, but as the victims of powerful dynasties. This image of Germans as victims, not perpetrators, living in a “weak zone” during continual war, recurs in the late 18th and early 19th century. Smith
emphasises the equal importance of periods of relative peace (mid-17th to mid-18th century, 1815-1866, after 1945) but pays less attention to their impact on German identity.

One could read these accounts of place, people, and experience as exploring three different uses of the same words. “Nation” and its related proper nouns occur in many medieval and early modern texts, in Latin and increasingly in vernacular languages. However, words are not concepts. How can we move from words to concepts, from descriptions to interpretations?[3]

How, in turn, does the concept of nation relate to that of nationalism? It is generally agreed (though there is a significant dissenting minority) that nationalism, defined as a political ideology and/or movement, is modern. Smith notes that “German” and “Germany” had little political significance until modern times. Not too much should be made of the long history of the word “nation” in relation to the short history of “nationalism.” First, that lexical history varies greatly for different cases. The history of the word “Ghana” and its relationship to modern concepts of Ghana as nation and nationalism is very different from that of “Germany.”

Second, there is the danger of turning a chronological order of words into a causal relationship of concepts, i.e., as “nation” long precedes “nationalism,” nation is regarded as some kind of condition and nationalism some kind of effect. Doubtless, a rich, historic “nation” vocabulary will shape nationalist claims, because nationalists will invoke that vocabulary to explain and justify their projects. We can compare nationalist movements which can draw on such a vocabulary and those which cannot. Do these different movements - the history they construct, the political impact they have, the support they mobilise - appear significantly different? However, Smith cannot be criticised for restricting his ambitious work to Germany.

I return to the meanings of the national in peaceful times. This is not so much to criticise Smith as to point to what I see as important “everyday” dimensions to the growth of national identity.[4] Given how much Smith considers it would be unreasonable to ask him also to look at these. My focus here is not on nationalism as explicit ideology and/or movement which claims power on the basis of the nation, whether to form a nation-state, or to use nation-state power for assertion abroad and/or “purification” at home. Nor is it about “nation” as an increasingly extensive and self-conscious sense of group identity. Instead it concerns the gradual, often imperceptible development of national patterns of behaviour in which the “national” figures as the implicit, common ground occupied by various parties, even when in conflict.

In my review article I argued that the formation of what one might call a German political culture can be traced through the Holy Roman Empire and its short-lived successors: Napoleon’s Confederation of the Rhine, the post-1815 German Confederation, the North German Confederation of 1866-71, the German Second empire.[5] All but the latter were condemned by nationalist historians like Heinrich von Treitschke who invested the concept of nation with ideal meanings of power and culture which were regarded as conspicuously absent from those institutions. Germans as victims in the Thirty Years War was national experience only as national shame. The Holy Roman Empire was an absurd, not a national institution. Nevertheless, alongside the noisy nationalism asserting power (especially by the Prussian state) and cultural identity (especially in German romanticism), there were other contributions to modern German identity.
In the relatively peaceful period from 1648 to 1740 the Holy Roman Empire proved quite effective in settling conflicts between its many and diverse polities. This “peace order” was disrupted by the outbreak of war between Austria and Prussia in 1740. These dynasties were members of the empire but its collegial way of conducting politics was at complete odds with their notions of dynastic sovereignty.

Napoleon’s confederal experiment was undermined by his own overwhelming power in a time of constant war. Nevertheless, it took up political concepts from the old empire such as distinguishing between “internal” and “external” sovereignty. This enabled individual states to implement significant internal reforms, with consequences extending beyond 1815, while Napoleon laid fiscal and conscription burdens upon them.

Most of the old empire was not restored after 1815, notably ecclesiastical polities, imperial knighthoods, and other tiny polities. The German Confederation consisted of fewer states, “artificial” amalgamations held together by bureaucratic institutions. Yet there were restoration aspects too, such as the creation of *Standesherren*, aristocrats granted special privileges within the new states, privileges related to their previous status as imperial nobles. Prussia and Austria dominated the Confederation but were constrained to do so in a peaceful and joint manner which allowed a degree of autonomy to other members.

Furthermore, the German Confederation inadvertently enabled the formation of a widespread network of liberal constitutionalist and radical democratic groups, due to its efforts to block reform in individual states, thereby offending against the notion of “internal” sovereignty. This national politics was accompanied by the growth of a mundane, bourgeois but definitely German culture. Such developments extended a “national” pattern of politics beyond elites to ever-larger groups and fields of activity.

This made possible the rapid emergence of a national politics in 1848-49. Germany was unique in that year of revolution in constructing political movements and institutions, such as elections based on widespread manhood suffrage, which transcended individual states. These increasingly national, but not explicitly nationalist, developments, created crucial conditions for the later sequence of events retrospectively called “German unification.” It was a strange “unification” which excluded the largest German state and brought to an end a long history of German political institutions. That gradual diffusion of national ways of acting and thinking helps explain the widespread agreement that this was unification, not conquest.

The Second Empire was celebrated by Treitschke as the glorious convergence of German culture and (Prussian) state power, a destiny which must lead on to greater things as this Germany asserted itself in the wider world. The achievement was closely bound up with the growth of mass politics, mass media, modern technologies of communication, transportation, warfare, and of material production. International relations became a competition between a small number of powerful nation-states which – with the signal exception of Germany – were at the core of extensive empires. In Smith’s words we are moving from an age of nationalism to a nationalist age.

Smith focuses on one kind of nationalism: imperialist nationalism which, in radical, ethno-nationalist form, culminated in Nazism and the short, destructive life of the Third Reich. I leave consideration of
these subjects to colleagues more expert than myself. Instead I return to how national identity develops beyond such explicit nationalism.

The “nationalist age” to which Smith refers might also be described by Siniša Maleševič’s phrase “grounded nationalism.”[6] By this Maleševič means not an explicit political ideology or movement but rather pervasive, usually mundane features of ordinary life, something others have called “everyday” or “banal” nationalism. Measured by these meanings of nationalism, I would argue we enter the nationalist age in the peaceful years of the Second Empire, not with the first world war. In this period the nation-state interacted with the lives of more and more people in many different ways such as conscription, welfare measures, elections, and tariff policy. Insofar as many of these practices were valued by parties opposed to the imperial regime, their supporters might be described as implicit nationalists, very different from explicitly nationalist parties and pressure groups.

Such nationalism helps explain much of the support for the regime when it went to war in 1914. Despite their detestation of the regime, there were many ready to defend Germany against external threats. Many of these “implicit nationalists” later turned against regime, not just because the war was being lost, but because they had come to believe it was not being fought in the national interest, indeed never had been, and they had been deceived.

Smith provides powerful accounts of such cases, notably Käthe Kollwitz, who had supported her school-age son, Peter, in joining the army at the outset. She was grief-stricken when Peter was killed but grief alone does not explain her shift to opposing the war. Rather, Smith’s powerful distinction between “sacrifice for” and “sacrifice of” can be related to that between explicit and implicit nationalism. These different kinds of nationalism, deepened and intensified by the war itself, continued into the Weimar Republic – a more genuinely national state than its imperial predecessor. Of the parties which opposed the rise of Nazism, only the Communist Party was explicitly anti-nationalist.

The Third Reich repressed those parties and their values. How far they destroyed these or drove them underground is difficult to judge. However, in Smith’s illuminating chapters on the post-1945 Federal Republic (he omits the German Democratic Republic and Austria) I think we see the reappearance of such political values, even if expressed in different ways.

Smith then turns to the unique achievement of the Federal Republic – during another period of peace - of acknowledging the crimes committed between 1933 and 1945 in the name of the German nation. For many Germans active in bringing this about, this was anti-nationalism, associated with European or cosmopolitan or humanitarian values. However, it also drew on earlier forms of grounded or implicit nationalism. Such nationalism is always about something more than bare national assertion, and that something more is often more apparent than its national character.[7]

It is during those periods of peace that we see most clearly the working out of Smith’s third theme: the growth of empathy. Periods of war or violent conflict are not conducive to such empathy. Negotiations in times of peace - whether political, or between employers and employees, or in many other spheres of life – both promote and are promoted by the capacity to see the other’s point of view. Smith’s decision to use Auerbach’s Mimesis was an inspired one, as Auerbach traces back over centuries the ways in which, at least in literature, this capacity was formed and expressed. Smith’s
account of how Germans after 1945 came to reflect on their recent history traces out such a capacity.

One final, speculative thought about how the Federal Republic was able to perform such empathy along with constructing a liberal democratic polity. Immediately after the war there was intense debate on how to create something new and better after the Third Reich. One idea was to call upon a “good” German past. Friedrich Meinecke in *The German Catastrophe* suggested founding Goethe societies across the land. This has echoes of the decision to hold the 1919 constitutional convention in Weimar, this place then giving its name to the republic which followed. Another idea was to make the constitution itself an object of loyalty, as Jürgen Habermas’s concept of “constitutional patriotism.”[8] This combination of cultural identity and constitutional form is a typical nation-state one. However, a national political culture cannot be founded just on such explicit ideas. It has to be practised over time, just as the achievement of extended empathy in relation to the crimes of the Third Reich took generations. Arguably it was assisted by the re-emergence of repressed political traditions, including federal ones. As these were successfully practised over time, they promoted the formation of new political and cultural, but still national identities, such as those with streams of post-war immigration and settlement. Eventually, German constitutional and other achievements could become models to emulate.[9]

Smith is tackling a massive subject. It is impossible for one historian, let alone one book, to follow up on the many possible lines of inquiry. My criticisms disclose my own partiality, above all in the fields of political culture and institutions. In the fields Smith favours, he provides powerful arguments backed by illuminating detail and telling insights. Just to take at random two subjects because I found them so striking. The cartographic research and analyses are impressive and illuminating. The treatment of literary and visual genres such as poetry, novels, travel accounts, and paintings, informed by Auerbach’s argument concerning the extension of realistic empathy, is brilliant, and something others should explore further.

This is an ambitious, finely written, highly original book on a huge and complex subject.

Eve Rosenhaft, University of Liverpool

*Germany: A Nation in its Time* is an impressive, and not least an impressively readable book. Each time I set it down I returned with anticipation, wondering what would happen next – or at any rate how the parts of the story that I already knew would be told. This is especially the case with the first half, which not only introduces us to the long pre-history of ideas of Germany, but which maintains a genuinely open-ended quality in its emphasis on parallel and competing visions. Helmut’s technique of building the narrative around artifacts makes for a multi-perspectival and polyvocal account which is both original and engaging, and in the chapters on the early modern period there is a very productive resonance between narrative structure and the uncertain and negotiable shape of Germany as place and nation. The account of technologies of seeing, knowing and representing is also very effectively embedded in the explication of political and military developments and their contingencies. Alongside the usual suspects I met some unfamiliar faces here, and saw my sense (for example) of the relationships between local and territorial state patriotisms and the emergence of the
national idea in the eighteenth century challenged. And I was in happy suspense as I waited to see how the issue of inclusion/exclusion (or Germany's others), which Helmut trails very early with reference to Jews, and the proposition about the masculinity of the modern nation which he introduces in discussions of enlightenment and Romantic subjectivities and the Wars of Liberation would work out over the *longue durée* of the narrative.

From this point of view I found the second half of the story – unification and after - less compelling. At one level, of course, the element of suspense was bound to diminish, since with the consolidation of the Bismarckian Reich it’s difficult not to take the nation as fixed and the contours and pathologies of German nationalism as read. But there is also a structural problem that asserts itself once the question “Where and what is Germany?” appears settled: What was planned as an extended essay on visions of the German nation, including a re-evaluation of the origins and consequences of modern nationalism (Helmut’s three key arguments), was at some point re-cast (and is certainly being marketed) as a survey history of Germany. The former of these two aims – a critical account of the emergence, vicissitudes and (worst case) pathological outcomes of nationalism – seems to me to explain the otherwise perplexing treatment of National Socialism as the *terminus ad quem* of the account (with the first decades of the Federal Republic as a kind of coda and the apologetic *Brüskierung* of the GDR), though even from that point of view it is not clear why the entire space of Nazism’s excluded (and eliminated) others should be occupied by the genocide of Europe’s Jews and its machinery. More generally, in Parts III and IV, nationalism almost seems to write its own history. In terms of the narrative structure, this goes along with a shift from the early focus on material artifacts (maps, clocks, roads) to the works of established writers and artists as counterpoints to an increasingly detailed though often allusive political narrative. As the story begins to take the shape of a national history (rather than a study of one of many conversations among Germans), polyvocality looks more like a gesture and less like a method.

It seems to be the drive to turn an essay on nationalism into a new history of Germany that pushes the story beyond 1945, since as it turns out, neither Germany nor its history came to an end then. Of course, 1945 also reset the terms for a continuing debate about “nation,” and here I thought an opportunity was missed to extend the essay, by showing how Dolf Sternberger’s “living and not deathly concept of fatherland” (p. 425) materialized. The passive voice of opinion polls which Helmut uses as evidence suggests an absence of articulate debate, but this just obscures the active projects of nation-building that were going on in the background. Similarly, there are good grounds for giving attention to rhythms of memory and reparative justice in relation to the Holocaust, since Helmut’s concept of temporality allows us to understand them as a retrospective construction of nation – grounded in new ways in a vision of the past which was the opposite of glorious. But this after all familiar and almost reflexive recapitulation of discourses of guilt and responsibility tends to drown out the processual and in-the-now character of postwar reconstruction – the peculiar balancing act of a nation state that claimed to be provisional while building a social order that aimed for permanence. Here there are two points of reference that I really missed. One is Sternberger’s concept of *Verfassungspatriotismus* and its revival by Jürgen Habermas in the debates of the 1980s.[10] The other is the self-conscious vision of the Federal Republic as a consumer democracy, re-writing the social compact of the welfare state, and the terms of national belonging itself, in the language of the social market economy (and without which neither the critical liberalism of the 1970s nor the
Deutschmarkpatriotismus of 1990 can be explained).

A fuller account of these post-war transformations might have triggered, or made space for, a more thoroughgoing acknowledgement of the constitutive force of gender, which has been so central to historians’ understanding of life and politics in the two Germanies (though, of course, not only there). As I note above, this is anticipated in Helmut’s account of developments around 1800, but then reappears mainly in individualized form, in vivid accounts of exemplary women (Bettina von Arnim, Käthe Kollwitz) and welcome but cursory references to women’s activism in support of colonialism and mobilisation in wartime.

In terms of Germany’s others and their place in the construction of the nation, too, we can now tell a more complex story about developments after 1945. The implication that in the 1960s West Germany was an ethnically homogeneous society into which “Ausländer” fell (or were dragged), to be spontaneously accepted or rejected, is really quite old-fashioned. The point is that the nationalist vision was always out of sync with the reality of a multi-ethnic and pluricultural polity, and that is indeed more than implicit in Helmut’s general account. But since we don’t see very much of this plurality before 1945 the nuancing remarks that he offers about postwar homogeneity don’t grip.

That is, in aggregate the subjects of the nation whom we meet here are those who have the power to define the others out – the usual suspects of German history. There is some logic in that. If we recognize nation as continuously contested and under construction, though, there must be a place for other voices. We hear some of them here, notably the poor and low-born, sometimes at second hand or as objects of compassion. Jewish voices are also very present, commenting and engaging from the unique position of insider-outsiders. To be sure, some voices are easier than others to hear. In the sources with which German historians work, Jews talk a lot, Black people occasionally though with increasing urgency, Sinti and Roma hardly at all before the 1980s. These absent presences are themselves artifacts of the history made by “nation.” But in writing that history to do we have to collude in maintaining those silences?

There is a Black voice in the book, of course, and the choice of W.E.B. du Bois is characteristically deft, since he not only represents a self-conscious Black perspective but by his presence also invokes, if only suggestively, the transatlantic exchange between America and Germany on questions of race and empire. As a sort of thought experiment, I wondered what would happen if we tried to tell the story through Black German voices.[11] In chapter 3 we might have listened to the court trumpeter Christian Real, a Hofmohr in Stuttgart, who enters the archives when he is attacked by a gang of young men in 1669, although – or perhaps because – he is dressed in ducal livery. He has nothing to say about Germany, but his contemptuous retort to his attackers – “And you claim to be servants of the prince?” – places him firmly inside the system of territorial courts. Similarly, if in the following chapter we pay a visit to the philosophy professor Anton Wilhelm Amo, captured in Africa, enslaved and raised in Wolfenbüttel and trained in Helmstedt, Halle and Wittenberg, we will find him writing about the liberty of Black people in the context of the Ständestaat. He returned to Africa in 1746, a victim (like many a civil servant) of a loss of patronage, and thus exposed (like few others, excepting some of his Jewish contemporaries) to racist attacks – and we can only speculate on what, if anything, he had to say about Germany to his family and neighbours on the Gold Coast. In chapter 5 might appear the unnamed African enslaved by the man who would become Bettina von Arnim’s father-in-law, who petitioned Frederick the Great for the freedom to which he thought himself entitled as a
subject of the Prussian Crown. It turned out he was wrong, but that changed with the promulgation of the Allgemeines Landrecht in 1794, and the abolition of slavery on Prussian soil was part of the emerging re-constitution of the relationship between state and individual. The Cameroonian immigrant Mandenga Diek could seek, and gain, naturalisation as a German citizen in chapter 9. In chapter 10 he will sign a petition to the Weimar Nationalversammlung expressing confidence in the new democracy and calling not for the liberation of Germany’s African colonies but for self-government for Cameroon within the Empire and equal rights for Africans in colony and metropole.

With a brief wave to the Afro-Germans who joined the Hitler Youth even before 1933, and to the dismay with which the Afro-German poet and activist of the next generation, May Ayim, greeted German unification in 1990 – I want to return to that 1919 petition. Of course it bespeaks a vision of Germany and Germanness, of a nation which is also a global power, and (quixotic as it was) it invites us to think about Germany beyond its continental borders. By drawing attention to plans and hopes never realized it reminds us how the operation of global networks, and not least the interruption of those connections in 1919, informed visions of Germany and the politics of nationalism.

It’s a poor reviewer whose best shot is “This is not the book I would have written.” In its scope and ambition, this is not a book I could have written. At issue here is the logic of the project that the book represents. What distinguishes it for me is precisely its polyvocal quality, but this narrative approach incurs its own challenges and responsibilities. How wide a scope or range of voices does the conceptual framework allow for? Is a history that sets out to trace developing visions of nation or currents of nationalism bound to be limited to the usual suspects? If so, what can be its purpose in the light of the ways in which narratives of Germany and Germanness have been reshaped and re-peopled by Black, Romani, gender and global studies and the material politics that underly those projects? As my comments above should make clear, I don’t think we need to confine ourselves to the usual suspects. It is certainly possible to write a history of Germany as polity and social formation that takes ethnic plurality, globality and a multiplicity of social actors into account. Similarly, as I sketch above, that wider range of actors can without much effort be inserted into the story as subjects of “nation.” But, in fact, I wonder whether more is lost than is gained in treating the problem of “nation” as a proxy for the course or shape of German history, particularly as we enter the third post-war generation. In the end, I want to ask who this book is for: Who is being invited to see themselves in it, and who (else) has what to learn from the picture of Germany that it offers?

Konrad Jarausch, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In many ways, Germany: A Nation in its Time is a splendid book. For once, the longue durée of the five-part narrative establishes a perspective that reveals the fundamental transformations of the German speaking world. Beginning with a discussion of the use of maps and inclusion of many literary quotes is an original approach that reveals the fundamental transformations of the German speaking world. Beginning with a discussion of the use of maps and inclusion of many literary quotes is an original approach that reveals the fundamental transformations of the German speaking world. Beginning with a discussion of the use of maps and inclusion of many literary quotes is an original approach that reveals the fundamental transformations of the German speaking world. Beginning with a discussion of the use of maps and inclusion of many literary quotes is an original approach that reveals the fundamental transformations of the German speaking world. 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During the first half of the book, the Germany that emerges from this somewhat revisionist
perspective is a largely peaceful and benign place that is not all that different from its western neighbors. The argument that a cultural sense of German nationness emerged out of territorial patriotism before the advent of nationalism, is rather intriguing and open-ended. The claim of the second part of the book that radical nationalism grew out of the traumatic World War One memories reemphasizes the culture wars of the Weimar Republic and avoids seeing all of German history as necessarily culminating in the Holocaust. But the word play of moving from patriotic “sacrifice for” the fatherland to “sacrifice of” Nazi victims provides a gripping account of mass murder and mass death, suggesting how Germany during World War Two became “a genocidal nation.” And the conclusion engages the post-nationalist efforts to come to terms with these horrible crimes.

This original approach, nevertheless, creates several problems of its own. For a lay reader the terminology that posits the development of an age of nationalism before descending into a nationalist age is bound to create some confusion. While the illustrations continue with impressive pictures, the last half-dozen maps shift from contours of imagined or real Germany to places of Jewish and Russian victimization. Also, the text retains a certain tension between high-culture reflection and event-focused narrative. The argumentation of the rise of the Nazi dictatorship that leans heavily on effects of World War One in order to explain the Holocaust underplays the continuity of the völkisch fringe and the capture of the state by committed anti-Semites. Since the original conception of the book had led towards the Holocaust and ended in 1945, it fails to do justice to the post-war transformations of the Germans. A framework that deals with mass murder cannot also give convincing reasons why the Federal Republic succeeded in re-civilizing itself and the GDR is barely mentioned at all. Of course, it is difficult to reject the simplifications of structural determinism and at the same time to explain the Zivilisationsbruch of the Third Reich.

One possible way of meeting this challenge would be a plural approach to the paradoxes of a succession of multiple Germanies over time. The rich cultural material presented by Helmut Walser Smith suggests the prevalence of continual contestations about territory, religion, social class and constitution within German speaking lands, with different forces winning at one time or another. Such a perspective could trace multiple teleologies of the radical right leading to the Holocaust, the radical left supporting the GDR experiment and the moderate middle bringing about the democracy of the Federal Republic. Instead of emphasizing a single line of development, such a recognition of plurality of continuities would do greater justice to the various contending visions of what it meant to be German at various times and places. The material for such an interpretation is all there in the text, it is just not quite made explicit.

Ultimately this is quite a thoughtful work, debunking many myths and advancing a vigorous interpretation of its own. The rejection of nationalist determinism through the notion of “a nation in its time” creates space for a fresh look at the surprising development of a German nation that led into nationalist genocide and beyond. In a particularly fortuitous formulation, for Helmut Walser Smith, the Third Reich is “a crucial, ultimately devastating, but also historical chapter” of German development. But when all is said and done, readers will, nonetheless, continue to be puzzled by the “German paradox” with its stunning mixture of both good and evil.

Helmut Walser Smith, Vanderbilt University
Politicians, pundits, and performers want only to be applauded. But scholars know that it is better to be understood and engaged with, for this is our only path forward. To this end, I thank the participants for the time and intelligence they have poured into my book. I also want to thank the organizers of the forum, Matthew Unangst and Jasper Heinzen from H-German, and Karen Hagemann and the team from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I was honored to be asked to present the book at Chapel Hill, and doubly so to see it included as the subject of an H-German Forum.

Let me offer my appreciation for the kind words about the book and permit me to state at the outset that there are criticisms I quite agree with. No one knows the tensions and shortcomings of a book as well as the author, and these s/he often feels acutely. One is the tension between a book that makes an argument about the nation and nationalism and a book that the publisher billed as “the first major history of Germany in a generation.”

[12] I set out to write the book with the argument in mind, but I also wanted to bring in enough of the details so that a reader could have a general outline of German history as such. It was never intended or written as a text book. That does not exempt it from criticisms of exclusions and of the relative weight of topics. It does, however, mean that the book, in the first order, has to follow its own problem. And this was to chart the changing conceptions of what a nation is and how one knows it. There are maps in chapter one because that was a principal way of knowing. There are opinion polls in chapter fourteen because in the postwar era, at least in West Germany, opinion research was a crucial and novel artifact of national imagining (alas, this particular focus had the unfortunate side effect of making it difficult to compare West and East Germany).

There are other criticisms I agree with, and they are directed at all parts of the work. The first is Terry McIntosh’s astute observation that while I treat the period, circa 1500, as one of relative peace, I sidestep the details of Habsburg aggression. Some of that detail was cut. But other aspects were never in there to begin with—like Maximilian’s Italian campaigns. It is also the case that some humanists, especially those busy flattering the emperor at the imperial court, were more bellicose than the humanists I discussed at length. On balance, though, I think I was right to argue against a continuity thesis of aggression in German national understandings from this time. I also agree with Konrad Jarasuch’s criticism that what he calls “the post-war transformations of the Germans” required more space than I gave it. If I could have written the book all over again, I would have given myself another two years to work on the postwar era. My original proposal was, in fact, for a two-volume work, in which the postwar era would have received more attention. But there are good reasons for publishers not to embrace such works.

There are also omissions that I regret as a result of cutting the page numbers of the text (down from its original length, a quarter longer than the published version). Dolf Sternberger’s notion of constitutional patriotism, echoing his earlier ideas of “a living, not a deathly, fatherland” are among them. No doubt, there are parts of the story that I should have integrated better. When I read John Breuilly’s original criticisms about 1848, likewise published in H-German, I realized that I had missed analytical possibilities. There are also areas of weakness, a few in scholarly fields I used to call my own, but felt this time I had little new to add. The history of religion is such a field. Perhaps too Germany and the colonies. In an important way, the book is a work of exploration, my own. I followed

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my miner’s pick.

I might also have followed suggestions for deepening the analysis. Terry McIntosh correctly notes that in addition to the eighteenth-century discovery of the people, the Volksaufklärung was equally important to the German Enlightenment. He also notes that I could have pushed harder on Austrian setbacks in the eighteenth century. At one level, he is no doubt right. At another level, I was impressed by contemporary fears of Austria and its remilitarization under Joseph II. And after all, while both Prussia and Austria fell to defeat at the hands of Napoleon, Austria put up the protracted fight--nineteenth-century nationalist mythmaking notwithstanding.

Finally, there is a matter of argumentative style. Konrad Jarausch is right to note the revisionist intent of the manuscript. I regret not making that intent more explicit, and that I did not name those who I was arguing against. I did not want to turn the book into a polemical work or a work that parses the historiography. My hope was that scholars in the field would recognize the arguments even when I hid the light of those arguments under a bushel.

Let me address two very general criticisms. The most important is a point of logic raised by John Breuilly. Just because a thing is called by the same name does not mean that it is the same thing: to wit, a nation by the same name (in the early modern period) is not necessarily the same thing (as in the modern period). Breuilly and I actually agree on this. The question is whether the two terms are fundamentally different, or sufficiently related so that we can speak of one thing as resulting from a transformation of the other thing. Ernst Gellner famously noted that nationalists make nations, not the other way around. My contrary argument is that nationalists transformed what a nation is, how we know it, and what it does. The book is about a series of transformations in the phenomenology and epistemology of the nation. It takes as its theoretical starting point Reinhart Koselleck’s insight in Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe that political vocabulary changed dramatically during the so-called Sattelzeit, so that concepts came to have radically different meanings. It also follows Benedict Anderson’s injunction, perhaps more faithfully than he himself did, to understand the imaginary communities of nations “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”[13] This meant taking nation-artifacts seriously. And it meant seeing the transformations in the different styles of imagining. It meant seeing nationalism not as the maker of nations but as a chapter within the history of changing conceptions of the nation.

Allow me to address as well the other fundamental criticism. In her thoughtful commentary, Eve Rosenhaft levels a series of criticisms, one of which I agree with, and a polemically posed question: who was the audience of the book? The criticisms are that my use of the “passive voice of opinion polls” obscures the nation-building projects on the ground; that “a fuller account of these post-war transformations might have triggered, or made space for, a more thoroughgoing acknowledgement of the constitutive force of gender”; that the book makes it seem as if “in the 1960s West Germany was an ethnically homogeneous society into which ‘Ausländer’ fell.”; and that “in aggregate the subjects of the nation whom we meet here are those who have the power to define the others out – the usual suspects of German history.” Let me say that I agree that the last chapter of the book ought to have worked more, as earlier chapters in fact did, with gender as an important category. Throughout the book, I took care to read German ideas of nationhood through contemporaries, a number of them women. This way of writing the narrative--through the eyes of contemporaries--belongs to the fundamental architecture of the book. It informs its historicist assumptions and buttresses its
resistance to teleology. In earlier drafts of chapter fourteen (“The Presence of Compassion”), I tried to weave in the biography of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the director of the Allensbach Institute. Unfortunately, for various reasons, I could not make it work. Let me simply state my disagreement that opinion polls are passive (especially in the early days, they were one of the least elitist approaches to understanding how people think—a point Noelle-Neumann never tired of repeating). Let me note, too, that in terms of ethnicity, the 1950s were, in fact, one of the most homogenous periods in the history of the German nation state, and that I gave considerable attention to the dynamics behind the beginnings of the West German Gastarbeiter program and West German reactions to it. Finally, I will let readers decide if mine is a history populated by the usual suspects.

I do want to address the question of to what end and for what audience such a book is written. To begin, I want to reiterate my starting point: tracing expressions of nation over a long period of time. This was a project that grew out of a scholarly question: whether nationalists made nations or the reverse. The first audience, then, is the audience of scholars and students. The second is a larger audience: the trade-press audience, the audience of people not in our networks. For this larger audience, the book does have a message. It is that it is possible to imagine a nation, indeed be attached to it, and even proud of it, without being a nationalist. This is why the before and after nationalism is so important, as well as the altered Kantian differentiation between the age of nationalism and the nationalist age. Perhaps the differentiation is too subtle, as Konrad Jarausch noted. But for some it has not been. The journal Internationale Politik named it as a book of the year in 2020 and gave as a reason precisely this argument: that the book shows that it is possible to embrace German national history without adopting nationalist positions. There are other hidden scripts in the book. One is that it is not actually possible to embrace national history without the ruthless gaze into the nation’s genocidal history. In a publishing era of stark dichotomies—let us take 1619 vs. 1776 as emblematic—I tried to write a history of nation conceptions that reveal a wide spectrum of possibilities and at the same time insist that there is no way forward without a precise understanding of what actually happened in the Nazi era (and not just in Germany, and not just between 1933 and 1939, but during the war, in Nazi-occupied Europe, and especially in Eastern Europe). One of my first readers, literally a week after the book came out, was an older scholar who as a young man had to bring his mother to the place from which she would be deported to the camps. He thanked me for the chapter on “the genocidal nation” in particular. I have an intellectual and even emotional attachment to the generation of my teachers, and to some extent I wrote the book, as I think I write all my books, with them in mind. Finally, I also wanted to reach a younger generation of Germans who are more at ease with the nation than my generation of Germans. But I wanted to make clear that the fact of the Germany’s descent (into a genocidal nation) constitutes an indispensable focal point for even thinking about Germany’s national history.

I write this because I belong to those who fear that, for a range of reasons, we are slipping into a “third repression,” following what Ulrich Herbert diagnosed as a second repression of the late sixties and the first half of the 1970s. We like to think of scholarship as additive. Yet sometimes, as John Dewey once said of philosophy, scholarship progresses not by solving problems but by abandoning them. A major university press editor recently told me that s/he would like to go beyond the usual Holocaust-centered narratives. This is what I mean by the third repression. Our understanding is becoming more abstract and less precise, especially of the particulars of the genocide that transpired in the first half of the 1940s. We are moving on.


For one conceptual approach see the work of Walter Pohl and others, most recently in Gerda Heydemann and Helmut Reimitz, eds., *Introduction to Historiography and Identity II: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), especially the introduction by Pohl, “Debating Ethnicity in Post-Roman Historiography,” 27-68.

These “other” national aspects can be related to Konrad Jarausch’s comment about “multiple teleologies.”

For a short argument about the history of this political culture see Langewiesche, *Vom vielstaatlichen Reich zum föderativen Bundesstaat*. See also the comments by Terence McIntosh in his contribution on how the Habsburgs, in their capacity as Holy Roman Emperors used “German” forces for their own dynastic projects. One could also add how the idea of being “German” was used beyond “Germany,” e.g. by “Saxon” settlers in Transylvania.


I draw upon the distinction Michael Freeden makes between “thin” and “thick” nationalism. See his article “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?,” *Political Studies*, XLVI (1998), pp.748-765.

See also Eve Rosenhaft’s comment about “constitutional patriotism” in her contribution.


Many of the individuals mentioned here are well represented in the historical literature on the Black presence in Germany. The stories of Christian Real and the petition to Frederick the Great feature in a new publication: Arne Spohr, "Violence, Social Status, and Blackness in Early Modern Germany: The Case of the Black Trumpeter Christian Real (ca. 1643 – after 1674),” and Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, "Slavery and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” both in Beyond Exceptionalism. Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650-1850, ed. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Josef Köstlbauer, and Sarah Lentz (Berlin: de Gruyter/Oldenbourg, 2021), 57-80 and 137-62, respectively.
