GERMANY AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN WORLD,
1780-1820

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My subject was suggested by the larger project I am working on, about Germany and the world since 1500. As Thomas Bender wrote in his recent transnational history of America, “the nation cannot be its own historical context”. ¹ Now, “transnational” has become a buzzword and we historians should not be creatures of fashion. The transnational approach does not invalidate comparative history or microhistory, and can in fact be combined with each. Yet transnational history has particular attractions. The idea of the nation as “container” misses the movement of people, things, and ideas. It overlooks the porosity of borders, underplays zones of contact and exchange, favors the homogeneous over the hybrid. It also makes it harder to see commonalities — the history a nation shared with other nations. I hope today’s lecture will show the virtues of a transnational approach.

I have chosen to talk about the period 1780-1820 partly because of what it is not: it is not the twentieth century. Let me add immediately that I have nothing against the twentieth century. Some of my best friends work on the twentieth century. I've written on it myself. Nor, emphatically, am I suggesting that we turn our backs on the darkest episode of twentieth-century German history. My concern is about proportion. Quite suddenly, German history in this country has become almost synonymous with the history of the last hundred years. The share of twentieth-century articles and books reviewed in the journal Central European History has grown to 75 percent and more of the total. The same is true of history panels at meetings of the German Studies Association. At a time when there are fewer jobs in our field in North America, it is no surprise that graduate students, seeing positions listed as “Twentieth-Century Germany” or “Post-1945 Germany”, and facing advice on all sides that this is the shape of the future, take the hint and opt for “marketable” topics. One of many undesirable effects of this trend is that, if pre-1914 history withers in North America, it threatens to create asymmetry in the transatlantic exchange (unless, of course, younger German scholars

also opt overwhelmingly to neglect everything but the last hundred years, in which case we’re all in trouble). This is not the time to dig deeper into the reasons, but I do think this quite dramatic shift should be registered.

Not that any apology is necessary for talking about the decades on either side of 1800. This was truly a seed-time of the modern world. It is fifty years since Eric Hobsbawm wrote about the “dual revolution” — the political revolution in France, the Industrial Revolution in Britain.² More recent scholarship has only added to our sense of this period as a hinge of history. A warfare-generated period of upheaval shook all the major empires, bringing revolution not only to Europe but to the North American colonies, the Caribbean, and Latin America. On a larger scale still, Christopher Bayly has labeled this an era of “proto-globalization”³. The “Industrial Revolution”, meanwhile, has been cut down to size and post-dated; but in its place we have a commercial revolution in agriculture and what one historian has nicely called an “industrious revolution”⁴. This was also a time of demographic transformation, of rising populations that broke the Malthusian cycle, and a time when measures were increasingly undertaken to “conquer” nature, as the phrase went. There is good reason to refer, with Fernand Braudel, to “the end of the biological old regime” in Europe.⁵ Nor is that all. Admirers of the late Reinhart Koselleck — and who is not? — would point to his identification of this as a “Sattelzeit”, a period when ideas about history, about the nature of time itself, changed.⁶

Changes of this range and scale might, you would think, be interesting enough even to attract a few historians of Germany out of the twentieth century. But where exactly did Germans fit into this picture of transformation? There is one familiar answer. It was during these years that Germaine de Stael dubbed Germany the land of Dichter und Denker, writers and thinkers. She was not alone. For Friedrich Hölderlin, Germans were “rich in thoughts but weak in deeds.”⁷ A little later Heinrich Heine added his voice to the choir: Germans had merely thought what others had done. The historian Rolf Engelsing summed this up a generation ago when he suggested that while the British had an industrial revolution and the French a political revolution, Germany had a reading revolution.⁸ This is intuitively plausible and has cast a long shadow. I want to challenge the stereotype in two ways. First, it seems to me dubious to take so cavalier an attitude to the written word and to ideas at the very moment when a modern world was being forged in which education, culture, and disciplinary

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3 David Armitage and Sanjay Subramanyam, eds., The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840 (Basingstoke, 2010); C. A. Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914 (Malden, 2004).
8 Rolf Engelsing, Der Bürger als Leser (Stuttgart, 1974), 256-67.
knowledge would enjoy such huge authority — and I would add that the dismissive view often shown towards the connected idea of a distinctive German “inwardness” also sits awkwardly with efforts to understand what one scholar (writing about Britain) has called the “invention of the modern self” in these years.9 I will return to these issues later in my lecture. But I also want to challenge the idea that Germans only thought while others acted, and it is to that I turn now.

I.

The world became a smaller place in the late eighteenth century. Of course, the world is always becoming a smaller place: the modern state is always rising, and the world is always getting smaller. This was not yet our world, the world whose unprecedented globalization we celebrate (and exaggerate). It was not yet even the world of the mid-nineteenth century, joined together by steamship and telegraph. But networks of communication were becoming much more tightly meshed through travel and exchange, the movement of commodities, people, and ideas. When Wilhelm von Humboldt, the more sedentary of two famous brothers, sat at his desk writing about world languages, he was connected with hundreds of correspondents on five continents: scholars and diplomats, merchants and missionaries. Germans themselves were everywhere. Merchants from the Baltic and North Sea coasts were central to the carrying trade of northern Europe. They were resident in the great mercantile hubs of London, Antwerp, and Amsterdam. And they had a global presence. Because there was no German empire overseas, the role of Germans along the arteries of world trade can easily be overlooked, from West Africa to the Dutch East Indies, from the eastern seaboard of North America to the Spanish empire. They were merchants, settlers, printers, and booksellers. They served on Dutch merchantmen and Scandinavian whaling ships, and they served on land as soldiers under many flags. The famous Schlegel brothers had an older sibling, Karl August, who was a soldier for the English East India Company and died in Madras in 1789, while the world’s attention was elsewhere — a death, some have argued, that shaped his brothers’ fascination with India.10 In Dutch Surinam, the imprint of German merchants, craftsmen and farmers was such that visitors thought this Caribbean colony more German than Dutch.11

The German place within the Atlantic world is starting to be recognized. The German lands were integrated into the Atlantic economy,

10 Suzanne L. Marchand, German Orientalism in the Age of Empire (New York, 2009), 60.
11 Percy Ernst Schramm, Neun Generationen (Göttingen, 1963), 174.
which carried the products of the slave plantations — sugar, coffee — back to Germany, where their consumption sparked debates in the journals and coffee houses, as they did in other countries, about fashion and gender roles, and occasionally even about slavery. The German role in the peopling of the Americas also created some remarkable transatlantic networks, religious in their origins but wider in their effects. One was formed by the Moravians, the Herrnhuter of Saxony. By the late eighteenth century they circled the Atlantic world with their missions in London, Ireland, Greenland, West Africa, the Caribbean and North America, where they spread out from Pennsylvania to establish congregations and Indian missions from Maine to the Carolinas. All this required money, and in 1758 the Moravian merchants had created the Commercial Society, which was intended, as one of them put it, “to start a commerce that the Lord could sanctify and bless”. Lutheran Pietists created an even more impressive network radiating out from Halle. Their missionaries could be found from Siberia to Malabar. Pietist agents shipped ironware and glassware up the Elbe to Hamburg, traded in Russian grain, brought sugar and coffee back for resale in Venice and Amsterdam. They carried news through their courier system, and brought pharmaceuticals as well as Bibles to the new world. The late eighteenth century saw an intensified exchange of books, copper plates, as well as botanical and agricultural specimens across the Atlantic.

It is hard to make a clean separation between the intellectual and the material in exchanges of this kind. The same is true of another activity that took Germans around the world — as mining engineers. Decades before Germany became famous as the “fatherland of forestry”, providing foresters to the British Raj and establishing the first Forestry Schools in the United States, German mining engineers were sought after from Russia to the Andes. Now, the mine (like the forest) is a ubiquitous motif in Romantic literature, a place of darkness and mystery, and a remarkable number of contemporary writers had been trained as mining engineers — Novalis, Eichendorff, Brentano, Körner. But, I want to suggest, sometimes a mining engineer was just a mining engineer. One such, emblematic of what I have been talking about, was Fürchtegott Leberecht von Nordenflycht, a Saxon-trained mining engineer who worked in Poland, then accepted a commission from the Spanish crown in the 1780s to inspect and reform the silver mines of Peru. He and his fifteen fellow engineers created a mineralogical laboratory which became the Peruvian Mining School before Nordenflycht, after twenty-five years in the new world, retired to Madrid with his Creole wife.
In Lima Nordenflycht met Alexander von Humboldt — another mining engineer by training, although very much more than that. In his famous five-year *Journey to the Equinoctial Regions* with Aimée Bonpland, Humboldt established the connection between the Orinoco and Amazon river basins. He scaled volcanoes, descended mines, collected rock samples, and handled electric eels; he studied the flora and fauna and sent specimens back to Europe. He examined everything from the properties of guano to the prospects for sugar plantations, and everywhere he went he measured things — heights, distances, temperature.¹⁵ He returned in 1804 a celebrity — “our conqueror of the world”, in Goethe’s words. The decades on either side of 1800 have been called a “second age of discovery.” Herder captured the spirit of the age when he wrote in 1784: “Man, while he continues man, will not cease from wandering over his planet, till it is completely known to him; from this, neither storms nor shipwrecks, nor those vast mountains of ice, nor all the perils of either pole, will deter him.”¹⁶ The poles would have to wait another hundred years. But this was a time when human knowledge of the earth advanced rapidly, and Germans had a major part in it, forging new connections as they did so. Thirteen years before Humboldt’s journey Joseph II dispatched a group of Austrian botanists to Caracas. They returned after three years with samples — and with new-found Creole friends, to whom they sent musical instruments and musical scores of Haydn and Mozart. Humboldt’s friend Georg Forster had travelled around the world with Captain Cook and published a bestseller about it in English and German. Carsten Niebuhr travelled to Arabia and on to India as part of a Danish expedition that he alone survived, a journey that made him hardly less of a European scholarly celebrity than Forster or Humboldt. The list could be easily extended to include Peter Simon Pallas’s travels in Siberia or Friedrich Hornemann’s in Africa.

II.

Travel, thickening networks of communication, and “the animation of universal commerce” (as Fichte called it) all made the world more interconnected.¹⁷ They also shaped the German impact of the upheavals that came out of France and the Americas and remade the world politically. That impact was uneven in several respects. The revolt of the American colonies opened up American ports to direct trade by Hanseatic merchants; Napoleon’s Continental system and the English blockade then closed it down again — and with it, the flow of information. The flood of French political writing that appeared

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¹⁵ Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, originally published in French. The *Personal Narrative* made up the final three volumes of the 30-volume account Humboldt completed in 1834.


in German translation (more of it in the 1790s than in the previous ninety years combined) was offset by the slowing down of information from the Americas. The German lands that felt the shock waves were also far from uniform. They contained numerous petty territories and Mack Walker’s “home towns” gathered within the stifling, airless Holy Roman Empire. But they also included states that had already taken major steps down the road of princely enlightened reform “from above”, and within those lands there were — as we have seen — individuals and groups that had many contacts with a wider world. Alexander von Humboldt, admittedly exceptional, knew both Thomas Jefferson and Simon Bolivar, the South American “liberator.” A cautious admirer of the French Revolution (more cautious than his friend Forster), he spent the first quarter of the nineteenth century living in Paris and corresponding with an even wider range of people than his brother.

In turning to the impact of the revolutionary era in Germany, I want to start with France. For it was the French Revolution that recast German politics, whether by imitation, appropriation or rejection. Events in France had an immediate effect, prompting popular disturbances and a wave of enthusiasm among German writers, both established and young. Some went to Paris as “pilgrims of revolution.” But the disturbances were suppressed, and the Terror led to disillusionment. “They have betrayed our ideals and dragged them in the mud,” lamented Caroline Schlegel. Klopstock stopped writing odes to liberty, and instead displayed a bust of Charlotte Corday, Marat’s assassin, in his study. The radical course of the French revolution reinforced pride in German “moderation.” War and occupation then led both to preemptive reforms and to a spasm of Francophobia among some German intellectuals in the early nineteenth century.

The French Revolution was transformative. Most obviously, it redrew the map of central Europe, destroyed the Holy Roman Empire, and turned Germany into a constitutional laboratory. That process began in 1806, with the Napoleonic puppet states and the new constitutions granted in Baden and elsewhere. It continued, however unevenly, through the eras of reform and reaction, and through the renewed political unrest of the years after 1815 in Greece, Italy, Belgium, Poland, and Germany itself. Most German rulers found themselves with new subjects after the Napoleonic years and the 1815 settlement. They also had to operate on new political terrain. They were forced to learn — some were slower learners than others — how to manufacture consent through state-building, invented traditions, and

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timely concessions. By 1847 only four of the 39 member states of the German Confederation had no constitution. This might be seen as carrying through the program described by the Baron von Struensee in 1799, when he told the French charge d’affaires that the revolution that the French had made “from below” would be completed “gradually, from above” in Prussia — very gradually, it must be said, for Prussia was one of those four states that still lacked a constitution until after 1848.20

That is the view from the top down. But the French Revolution also bequeathed a new political vocabulary of nation, rights, liberty, and a new set of political symbols — the tricolor flag, the liberty tree.21 The use of this language and these symbols during German popular disturbances after 1815 was part of the French legacy, especially in the Rhineland. So was the cult of Napoleon, which persisted across the German lands in the form of broadsheets, vivats to the former Emperor in taverns, and songs like “Napoleon wo bist du denn?” But the French Revolution was also responsible for creating a modern conservatism that had its own reference points, the “historical” and “organic,” and its own vocabulary — hierarchy, order, faith. The lessons learned from France often floated free of their original source. One of those fire-eating Francophobes I mentioned, Ernst Moritz Arndt, nonetheless credited the French Revolution as inspiration. It had, he said, “ignited a great sea of fire in the mind.”22 German nationalists appropriated and reworked the new French political vocabulary, sometimes with an anti-French twist — although more so after the Rhine crisis of 1840 than before, and never universally. One French lesson had a long after-life. That was the lesson of the Terror. Even in the 1790s, Germans who welcomed the revolution had been drawn more to the Girondins than the Jacobins (Mirabeau was a great favorite). This was consistent with a widespread view, shared by some German rulers, that through their revolution the French were simply catching up with German enlightened reforms. The subsequent “excess” and supposed “self-interest” of the revolution undermined its appeal as a vehicle of reason and virtue. For German liberals, although not for radical democrats, the French Revolution provided the tools with which they forged a reformist but anti-revolutionary message: reform was necessary, because reform denied led to revolution.

The lessons Germans drew from events across the Atlantic often served as a foil to their reception of the French Revolution. The American Revolution was less bloody and more practical than the French — less “metaphysical”, said one admiring writer.23 (Let us
pause for a moment to enjoy this German criticism of the “metaphysical” French.) That was a recurring theme after 1815, when the volume of writing about the United States grew — including articles in new journals dedicated to the new world like *Columbus and Atlantis*. It remained true after 1830, when there was even more writing about America, for reasons partly connected with the onset of mass emigration. The United States interested German liberals because of the emphasis placed on constitutionalism, individual rights, religious toleration, and the rule of law. In other words, for the same reasons that Britain served as a model, with the added interest that the United States was a federal system. Perhaps the Bundestag could be reformed into something resembling Congress? The United States also offered the example of a new state being built from scratch, as the post-1815 German states were in fact being built. Robert Mohl wrote in 1824 that the United States was the state “which has taken up and represented in purest form the ideas that have so violently turned our time upside down.”\(^{24}\) Yet the signature aspect of the American revolution — “we, the people”, popular sovereignty — was largely bracketed out of German liberal, although not radical, discussions.

More than that: Despite their sympathy for the American experiment, liberals largely agreed with conservatives that US institutions could not simply be “injected” or “transplanted” into Germany. What was suitable for a rudely vigorous people in a wide-open land without history was not necessarily right for an old society. German liberals drew the same conclusion from the Latin American struggle for independence. A writer in the journal *Hermes* referred in 1821 to the “death struggles and birth pains” of the previous fifty years in the Americas, which had seen “the end of the old and the emergence of a new order of things” — a *Totalrevolution* in politics, religion and economics.\(^{25}\) And yet this revolution too, he and others argued, could not be transferred from the “free soil” of the Americas to Europe.

Radicals disagreed. These “world-historical events” — the term was much bandied about before Hegel took it up — represented “the seeds of a better future.” (I quote from an article in the *Politisches Journal* of 1815). The great revolt in South America would “perhaps sooner than some would like to think pull the European motherland into its powerful vortex.”\(^{26}\) Some wanted to speed these world-historical events along. South America became a site of German radicalism. Hundreds of Germans fought in Bolivar’s legions, others fought in the Uruguayan war of independence and


in the two republican uprisings in southern Brazil. In the second of these, in 1835, the Germans who fought alongside Garibaldi in the Guerra dos Farragos (the war of the ragamuffins) flew the red-black-gold flag of German radical nationalism. This was, of course, a displaced radicalism — a physical-force variant of the verbal radicalism practiced by a new German political emigration that stretched from Paris, Brussels, and London to the Americas. But sometimes the émigrés returned, like Samuel Gottfried Kerst, a veteran of radical campaigns in Uruguay and Brazil who was elected in 1848 to the Frankfurt parliament and became a leading advocate of a German navy.27

III.

Goethe, meanwhile, pinned an admiring note about Bolivar to the door of his bedchamber and proposed a design for the new Venezuelan national flag based on his theory of primary colors. (The proposal was adopted.) And with that I return in the final part of this lecture to the poets and thinkers. For how can we talk about Germany and the birth of the modern world without considering the impact of that extraordinary flowering of German literature and philosophy in the decades on either side of 1800? Consider for a moment just the talent gathered together in the Jena Circle of 1799 — Schiller, Fichte, the Schlegels, Schelling, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Tieck. Apart from the slightly older Schiller and Fichte, all were born within a decade of each other, between the late 1760s and the late 1770s, the same ten years that saw the birth of Hegel, the Humboldt brothers, Hölderlin, Kleist, and Beethoven.

I will not try to summarize the richness of thought we associate with these figures — the writers of the Sturm und Drang, the Romantics, Kant, and the idealist philosophers who took up his challenge. To do so would bring me quickly into the territory of Monty Python’s “Summarizing Proust” competition. But I do want to question whether we can be satisfied with the formulation I noted earlier in this lecture that Germans merely thought what others did. Did ideas themselves not change the world? German contemporaries certainly thought so. When Fichte wrote in 1793 about the French Revolution, which he supported, he nonetheless called the Kantian revolution “incomparably more important.” The young Joseph Görres made similar claims: “In the last ten years”, he wrote in 1797, “there has occurred in Germany the revolution by which this country has in the realm of theory contributed almost as much

to humanity as has France in the realm of practice, I mean our immortal Kant.”

In these decades German writers changed the way we think about ethics, the theory of knowledge, religion, law, language, music, art and aesthetics, work and vocation, humans and the natural world, and — not least — history. And what they wrote had a far-reaching impact. German ideas and German culture went around the globe. English literary notables from Coleridge and Carlyle to George Eliot and Matthew Arnold looked to Germany. So did their American counterparts. We can trace in individual cases how this happened. Coleridge, for example, travelled to Germany with Wordsworth and stayed there to study. He met Ludwig Tieck, his contemporary, with whom he shared a passion for folk diction and Shakespeare, and he translated Schiller’s *Wallenstein*. Most importantly, he introduced German philosophical and literary thought into England, often without attribution. His introduction of Schelling’s term “the unconscious” into English is one example of many.

In the American case, one could do worse than follow the reception of German thought at the institution where I once taught, Harvard University. Consider, for example, the student radical Karl Follen, who became a political émigré first in Switzerland, then in Massachusetts, where he changed his name to Charles, married a Cabot, and became Harvard’s first professor of Germanic literature, where he had a powerful influence on undergraduates. But Follen was working with the grain. It would be hard to overstate the spell that German thought cast on Harvard students in the early nineteenth century. The classicist and future Harvard president Edward Everett went off to do his Ph.D. in Göttingen after graduation. So did two of America’s most prominent nineteenth-century historians, George Bancroft and John Lothrop Motley. German ideas were formative for those graduates of the College and Divinity School we know as the New England Transcendentalists. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Thoreau, and Theodore Parker, as for many lesser lights, German philosophy, scholarship, and literature were a source of huge intellectual excitement. Acquiring German was, Thoreau exuberantly told his friend Orestes Brownson, “the morning of a new Lebenstag.”

When I refer to ideas changing the world, sometimes they were just that — particular ideas such as the categorical imperative, the Gothic, or the influential thesis propounded by one soon-to-be-famous German political émigré, Karl Marx, to the effect that previous philosophers...

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had only interpreted the world; the point was to change it. But this German contribution to the making of the modern world may be best understood by thinking about bodies of thought, or practices. I mentioned two of these earlier: mining engineering and scientific forestry. A third, also concerned with human mastery of the natural world, was the advent of a self-consciously scientific agriculture associated with the work of Albrecht Daniel Thaer. But when we think of German practices that had a truly global impact in shaping the modern world, then there are two that deserve special mention: music and education.

Music was not always the German art form. In the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth the cultural transfer ran in the opposite direction. German musical taste was influenced, first by Netherlandish, then by Italian models. It was the decades on either side of 1800 that established the tight fit between music and the Germans. That was, of course, partly a matter of the canon — the extraordinary cluster of German composers who created a repertoire that became truly global in the dawning age of the concert hall. But we are also talking about the centrality of German music journalism and music criticism, as well as the primacy of German musicianship. The German music tutor was prized beyond Germany. So was the German conductor or first violin. Think, for example, of the role that Germans would play in the formative years of the great American symphony orchestras.31 The German conservatory, meanwhile, was a magnet for ambitious composers and musicians everywhere.

Let me single out two educational institutions and their associated practices. One is Friedrich Fröbel’s Kindergarten. The product of a remarkable Swiss-German axis of pedagogical reform in the late eighteenth century, it had its origins in Thuringia in the years 1816-1820 and achieved a global impact in the century that followed. The other is the German research university. The early nineteenth century was once again the seed-time. These years saw the founding of a new university in Berlin and the re-establishment of others, including Heidelberg and Munich. The university, given up for dead by many educational reformers of the late eighteenth century, instead became the primary setting for the explosion of knowledge in the nineteenth century and beyond. The structure that emerged then, of scholarly disciplines, the scientific laboratory, and the research seminar, turned out to have more staying-power than the spinning jenny or factory chimney. And the German university, like the conservatory, became a magnet — George Bancroft and John Motley were just two of the...
10,000 Americans who earned Ph.D.s in nineteenth-century Germany — just as it became a global model to be imitated or selectively appropriated elsewhere.

The Kindergarten and the new university, both products of a reform era, sat awkwardly with the new age of state-building — and with the imperatives of commerce, come to that. The Kindergarten was denounced for its atheistic tendencies; universities, at least before 1848, were centers of political opposition. One idea they had in common was the value they placed on the interior self — the development of the child in one case, adult self-cultivation, or Bildung, in the other. I think it is worth emphasizing how German writers in these years helped to give us a vocabulary with which to think about selfhood and subjectivity, starting with Kant and continuing through the younger generation who took up the gauntlet he threw down. Kant was suspicious of efforts to “eavesdrop on ourselves,” as he called it. He warned against “occupying ourselves with spying out the involuntary course of our thoughts and feelings.”\(^3\) Fichte, for whom the first person singular was never far away, dissented. So, above all, did the Romantics, who turned eavesdropping on themselves into a way of life. We can call this the cultivation of “inwardness.” We can also see it, for better or worse, as a foundational moment in modern notions of personhood and authenticity.

IV.

As I move to a close, some of you may be asking: Was there no dark side to what I’ve been talking about? And, of course, there was. Germans played a larger role in a burgeoning world economy than you would guess from reading Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, which barely mentions them. That meant Germans were also deeply implicated in the system of slavery — contrary to later claims of innocence and possession of a special affinity for native peoples. And far from being just dreamy poets, Germans played a large part in forging the instrumental view of nature so typical of these years — a view to which Romanticism was in part a response. There are other, more familiar respects in which the legacy of these years had a darker potential. German, especially Prussian educational accomplishments were mediated through a bureaucratic state that had been strengthened by the challenge of revolutionary upheaval. German music sometimes came in the form of the military band. The flowering of interest in German cultural folkways had an anti-French affect that found bitter expression in the years after 1806 and would burst out again in the

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future. All of the mighty cultural achievements of these decades had
the potential to feed German hubris, something that became increas-
ingly apparent after 1871.

After 1871: that’s the point. I believe strongly in lines of continuity
that link the German catastrophe of the twentieth century to the
nineteenth. But the key elements of continuity seem to me to belong
almost entirely to the late nineteenth century, the period that saw the
rise of an aggressive new nationalism, the advent of pseudoscientific
racism and eugenics, state surveillance on a new scale, the modern
cult of the “strong” political leader, and the spread of a recklessly
populist politics. A shadow falls somewhere between the years I have
been talking about today and the more sinister ideas and practices
of the decades before 1914.

Germany between 1780 and 1820 was not some innocent heile Welt.
This was a time of movement and change, as contemporaries very
well knew. When the Jena Circle broke up in 1800, its members
scattered across Germany, Italy, France, and Hungary. That was the
context of a letter written by Jean Paul in 1805 and addressed to
“Ludwig Tieck in space and time.” It is hard to imagine that being
written even a few decades earlier. Christopher Bayly has called this
an “axial age” in world history. It was a foundational moment for
much of what we recognize as modern, for better and worse. I have
tried to place Germans squarely within a new world in the making,
to insert them into a historiography that has been rewritten in recent
years largely without reference to Germany. Germans were not inert
bystanders when it came to the upheavals of the era. The world
became smaller in these years and Germans helped to make it so.
Through their ideas and practices, through travel, material exchange
and networks of communication, they contributed to the making of
a new world.

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34 Bayly, Birth of the Modern World, 83.