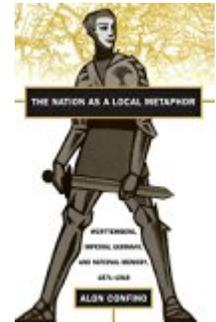


Alon Confino. *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiii + 280 \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2359-0.



Reviewed by John Eidson

Published on H-German (January, 1999)

At the outset of this stimulating and at times provocative book, Alon Confino cites Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* as an exemplary study of nation-building from the viewpoint of modernization theory. He argues, however, that a focus on modernization alone is insufficient for explaining the emergence of a "sense of national belonging" (p. xii). Rather than showing how local administrators and teachers brought the state to the province and how railroads brought provincials to administrative and commercial centers, Confino applies recently developed cultural approaches to show "how people internalize the abstract world of the nation to create an imagined community" (p. 4).

Confino's central theoretical debts are to Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, whose concepts he employs in an analysis of local and regional views of the nation in the Wilhelmine Reich. The scope of the study is further delimited by its focus on Württemberg, which—given the difficulties of integrating this socially and politically distinctive territorial state into the newly united Germany—represents a well-chosen case study.

Confino argues that attempts to cultivate a sense of national belonging based on the symbolism of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the Franco-Prussian war failed and that such attempts were only successful with the emergence of what he calls "the Heimat idea." The oft-repeated thesis of this study is that the Heimat idea served as "a mediator between the local place and the nation" (p. 98). This thesis seems, however, to appear in three variant forms. Confino suggests, first, that the local Heimat was an experiential realm which provided a matrix for perception and memory in social and political life; second, that the celebration of local and regional particularity compensated for the leveling effects of modernization (a line of thought associated with Hermann Luebbe, who is not cited); and, third, that these mediating and compensatory functions required that the image of the Heimat be reduced and altered for the purposes of national integration. Confino touches upon all three points but emphasizes the third. Commenting on narrative forms, he notes that, in some local and regional histories of Württemberg, the Napoleonic and Austro-Prussian wars were left out, since, from the viewpoint of turn-of-

the-century nationalism, this state had been on the "wrong side." Similarly, in his analysis of pictorial representations of various home towns, he concludes that the images in question have been simplified and standardized so that they correspond to a unified national vision of the Heimat in general. In this sense, Confino's concern with "how the multitude of local memories in Germany constructed a local-national memory" (p. 8) may be understood to mean that national memory was constructed by many different Heimat activists using local imagery and motifs.

Confino builds his argument around a comparison of two different attempts to mediate between the home town and the nation, namely, Sedan Day and the Heimat idea. In particular, he wants to show "why Germans rejected the former while accepting the latter" (p. 11). The first part of the book, which comprises 68 pages, is devoted to Sedan Day in Wuerttemberg, and the second part, which is 94 pages long, to the Heimat idea. For Confino, these seemingly disparate phenomena are comparable, since both involved representations and dramatizations of national identity which were constructed and implemented at the local level. In one of the many critical digressions which punctuate the book, Confino argues that it is mistaken to view Sedan Day as an expression of Prussian official culture. The military parade in Berlin commemorating the victory of 2 September 1871 coincided with Sedan Day but cannot be identified with it, since Sedan Day was first and foremost a project of the liberal Protestant bourgeoisie in the context of local and regional politics (p. 31). The promoters of Sedan Day employed symbols drawn from the Prussian dynasty and the Franco-Prussian war but attributed to them different meanings than they had in official Berlin (pp. 30-32, 85).

Confino seeks to exonerate the bourgeois notables of the charge of passivity, immaturity, and subservience to the militaristic state and to portray them instead as savvy political actors who

understood their interests and sought actively to defend them (in this context he acknowledges his debt to David Blackbourn). Sedan Day was not only a celebration of national union but "an instrument of power through which the liberals attempted to ... ensure their monopoly on the way to order and interpret national life" (p. 58). In Wuerttemberg, the ceremonial maintenance of notable politics meant, however, the exclusion of those with *grossdeutsch* inclinations, democrats, Catholics, and, somewhat later, workers. Nevertheless, the liberals were largely successful in maintaining control over the public expression of national identity for two decades after the founding of the Reich. Sedan Day was a casualty of the social changes which, beginning in the mid-1890s, caused the liberal bourgeoisie to lose its dominant position in regional and local politics.

Sedan Day was based on a national narrative which celebrated the *kleindeutsch* solution to unification and vilified the past as an age of particularism and disunity. Thus, it failed "to reconcile local and national pasts" (p. 64). This conciliatory function was precisely the virtue of the Heimat idea, which emerged in the new era of mass politics and mass culture. Confino devotes much attention to selected local organizations and expressive forms of the Heimat movement (pp. 79-124), but the weight of his argument is carried by three analyses of unequal length: one of the changing meaning of the concept of Heimat (pp. 126-130), a second of the form and function of the Heimat museum (pp. 134-153), and a third of pictorial representations of the Heimat (pp. 158-189). In each case, Confino attempts to demonstrate that Heimat involved "a simultaneous representation of the locality, the region, and the nation" (p. 101). The merits and difficulties of Confino's approach may be indicated with reference to his "iconographic analysis" of visual images of the Heimat. He begins by posing an important and neglected question: "What kind of scenery did the Germans have in mind when they thought and talked about the homeland?" (p. 159). The object of his analysis

is to discover the "paradigm of the Heimat image" by examining three hundred pictures published between 1880 and 1918 (p. 160). He argues convincingly that there is something like a code underlying the production of Heimat images by various artists but concludes puzzlingly that the discovery of this code renders the differences among the various "Heimats" [sic] insignificant.

Confino seeks to buttress his argument by comparing images, which are reproduced as illustrations in the text, and asserting that they are similar or even identical. But his suggestion that such images are interchangeable, simply because they include what he calls the "iconographic inventory of the Heimat"--"local houses, church tower, cityscape, and the surrounding nature and landscape" (p. 164)-- seems questionable. In those cases where a composite image has been produced by combining the features of two or more actual sites, one can see what Confino is driving at. Here, what is being invoked is not a particular Heimat but the idea of Heimat in general. Still, most illustrations represent actual towns. These may appear to be similar to those who are not familiar with them, but for local residents even small variations may take on a large significance.

One source of difficulty is that Confino has promised to look at images from both a) Heimat journals, books, associations, and history books and b) posters, postcards, paintings, drawings, and tourist guides (pp. 160-61). In fact, he concentrates on the latter category; and it is in the former that the individuality of one's own Heimat is most likely to be emphasized. Had Confino viewed this first set of sources against the backdrop of local and regional discourses, he would probably have found a characteristic emphasis on local individuality, which is articulated in terms of a code serving both to highlight that individuality and to integrate it into larger spheres of regional and national inclusiveness.

This lumping together of mass produced Heimat images (e.g., war loan posters) and locally

produced images (e.g., illustrations in Heimat books) is paralleled by an imprecise handling of the social groups responsible for producing and distributing Heimat images. After arguing in favor of pluralizing the category "bourgeoisie" in the period after the mid-1890s, Confino seems to treat this social class as if its character, motives, and strategies were homogenous. In addition to emphasizing the common cause among members of beautification societies in both large and small towns (p. 111), for example, Confino might have distinguished more carefully among different bourgeois groups within individual communities. He glosses over this point by focusing on groups concerned with cultural preservation and text production, while neglecting those more numerous groups that expressed their link to the Heimat through cultural performances. As a result, the reader gains little insight into the social dynamics of Heimat activities at the local level.

Another puzzling aspect of this study is the degree to which the author's conclusions resemble those of the scholars he has criticized. For example, after taking Wolfgang Hardtwig to task for his characterization of bourgeois political culture in the German Reich as an "escape from reality" (pp. 86-87), Confino concludes that "the Heimat idea functioned for the German bourgeoisie ... as a ... never-never land that was impervious to ... political and social conflicts" (p. 100). Hardtwig is accused of reinstating the *Sonderweg* thesis, but Confino has rediscovered another topos of seventies historiography, namely, the idea of *Sammlung*. A similar point could be made with reference to the failure of Heimat museums to represent social reality--a view which Confino seems to advocate after criticizing it in the works of others (pp. 149-150, 172-173). Perhaps his neglect of the local contexts of Heimat activities has given him no choice but to fall back upon a level of generalization with which he himself is dissatisfied.

Confino argues convincingly that the Heimat idea is an important constituent of German nationalism and that there is more to the Heimat idea than the critical theorists and historical social scientists have been willing to admit. In this sense, his argument is similar to that of Celia Applegate, whose ideas he both acknowledges and criticizes. Beyond that, Confino deserves credit for posing a series of important questions regarding the formation of national sentiment both in Germany and in general. But not all readers will be convinced that his attempts to answer these questions are definitive. He has not convinced this reviewer that those aspects of Heimat which cannot be equated with nationalism have no bearing on his argument. Nor has he shown that there are no aspects of nationalism that have little or nothing to do with Heimat. In fact, he has done the opposite. In a brief passage, which is admittedly speculative, Confino notes varying and non-overlapping usages of the terms "Heimat," on one hand, and "Vaterland" and "Nation," on the other. Brief though it is, his analysis is enough to suggest that Heimat has feminine connotations and is associated with peace, whereas Vaterland has masculine connotations and is associated with war. It would seem to follow logically that Heimat cannot be equated with Vaterland and that the complex phenomenon we call national sentiment must encompass both aspects. By viewing Heimat as an increasingly abstract, even empty category, Confino may be stripping it of those very qualities that make it different from and complementary to views of the nation based more firmly on political institutions. If he is really serious about pursuing his suggestion that nationalism--in Germany and elsewhere--is more appropriately viewed as a religion than as an ideology (pp. 4, 214), it is precisely these aspects of Heimat that he will need to retrieve.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the au-

thor and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: John Eidson. Review of Confino, Alon. *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2679>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.