

Jon Vanden Heuvel. *A German Life in the Age of Revolution: Joseph Görres, 1776-1848.* Washington: Catholic University Press, 2001. xxv + 408 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8132-0948-7.



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A cursory glance at the dates of the title of this volume points out an intriguing relationship: the boundaries of Joseph Goerres's life correspond with the highs and lows of liberal democratic movements in the West, from the enthusiasm of the British colonies' Declaration of Independence in North America to the exuberant revolutions of 1848 that heralded the failure of the revolutionaries' dreams and the suppression of their democratic sympathies. This instinctive reaction to Goerres's biography is the type of judgment that his most recent biographer, the first to provide a full-length intellectual biography of this key German political polemicist, holds up for re-examination. Vanden Heuvel's detailed and often erudite biography attempts to clear away the debris of previous instrumentalizations of Goerres's biography.

If Protestant *Profanhistoriker* have viewed the Rhenish Catholic as a reactionary obstacle to democratic development, and Catholic historians exert themselves to provide a sympathetic picture that stresses Goerres's piety, in contrast Vanden Heuvel hopes to provide a re-assessment that

avoids the excesses and prejudices of either approach. Vanden Heuvel takes on a difficult task, not least because Goerres still stands for so many things to so many people. In addition to the views mentioned above, he can be claimed as the father of German political Catholicism, the originator of oppositional journalism, and an exemplary figure who proved to Catholic scholars in the wake of the *Kulturkampf* that Catholics were not adherents of an intellectually deficient faith. Besides the various receptions of Goerres that the would-be biographer confronts, Vanden Heuvel also faces the problem of how to characterize a life that turned from a comfortable childhood in the Catholic *Buergertum* of Koblenz to an early anti-religious political stance. In reaction to the conflict between the conservative Catholic atmosphere of Koblenz and the progressive pedagogy of his school, Goerres's youthful political sympathies verged on Jacobinism. His middle, Romantic phase was characterized by strong allegiances to a concomitant German nationalism during his years as a university professor. Later he published the pronouncedly nationalist *Rheinischer Merkur*, and his old age was characterized by a

return to conservative Catholicism and an active role as a political polemicist.

The twists and turns in Goerres's life were many and varied, but always characterized by conflict and opposition, as Vanden Heuvel acknowledges (p. 357). In a city that served as an initial outpost of hostility to the French Revolution, Goerres espoused a radical, almost Jacobin political philosophy. When the citizens of Koblenz feared French encroachment and local patriots agitated for their own republic, Goerres argued for the French annexation of all territory on the Left Bank of the Rhine. When France occupied the Rhineland, Goerres (disappointed by the French failure to take his own ideas seriously) opposed the French regime in his originally pro-French periodical, *Das Rothe Blatt*. Disillusioned with the French and with Enlightenment ideals, Goerres turned to Romanticism and retreated from the political stage just when adherents to the French style of thinking began to prosper in Koblenz. Dissatisfied with politics, he focused the lens of his Romanticism onto science. In conflicted response to the French ideas of the universal rights of man, and in line with his Romanticism, Goerres developed into a nationalist thinker. Initiated into the circle of the most respected Romantic thinkers at the University of Heidelberg, his opposition to the politically ascendant group of *Spaetaufklaerer* forced his return to Koblenz. In Koblenz, where many of his former schoolmates and fellow citizens had comfortably accommodated themselves to Napoleonic administration, Goerres began to write against the prevailing current, this time sublimating his nationalist sentiment in texts on German myth and philology published outside of the city. When the Wars of Liberation got underway, Goerres was finally and briefly in synch with many of his contemporaries, publishing the nationalist *Rheinischer Merkur* from 1814 to 1816. Initially, he espoused the ideal of *Grossdeutschland*, expressing enthusiasm for Prussia despite his Catholicism. His support for Prussia and criticism of other major German states meant that

his paper was banned in several of them very quickly; when the German Confederation was established, Goerres's disgust for its weak conception of German unity alienated both of the leading parties, in this regard Austria and Prussia (which had inherited governance of the Rhineland). The Prussian state, which Goerres had seen as the hope of Germany in 1814, suppressed the paper in 1816. By 1819, Goerres had to flee the Rhineland for Strasbourg in order to escape the reach of the Carlsbad decrees. In Carlsbad, a gathering point for radical political refugees from the German states, and in his ensuing trip to Switzerland, Goerres returned to Catholicism, at least partly out of opposition to his Prussian opponents. In the last phase of his life, he finally found a protector in the Munich of Ludwig I of Bavaria. Even here, however, he could not rest, provoking disagreement with Ludwig by writing for *Eos*, a journal that called for the retraction of Napoleonic state reforms and the restoration of guilds and traditional noble privileges. Finally, in the tumultuous atmosphere of the *Vormaerz*, Goerres openly opposed the predominating liberalism with which he had begun his political career in Koblenz. In contrast to the developing nationalism of Protestant thinkers, he took an ultramontane view that significantly influenced the later tenor of German Catholicism. He supported the actions of the Bishop of Cologne in opposing Prussian insistence on the secular prerogative to consecrate marriages, and envisioned popular piety as a means of not only expressing political opposition, but invigorating Catholicism itself. This political Catholicism was organized both to defend religious prerogative and to agitate in the German political sphere (p. 344).

Goerres was perfectly conscious of these transformations, remarking upon his arrival in Munich that he was now embarking upon his sixth or seventh life (p. 285). The great strength of Vanden Heuvel's biography is that in its judicious application of context, it makes every decision of Goerres, no matter how oppositional, seem per-

fectly reasonable within the unbelievable turmoil and chaos of the years between the French Revolution and the storm that the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna loosed upon the struggling German states. These were years in which even the most moderate thinker could be heavily buffeted by rapid political changes and sudden directional shifts of French and German policy, and the glimpses offered into Goerres's personality here show that he was a moderate neither by temperament nor by conviction. Occasionally one wishes for a slightly deeper analysis: if the Protestant Kant was popular among progressive Catholic intellectuals, what was the reading of Kant espoused in places like the Koblenz *Gymnasium* where Goerres encountered it? What then was the relationship of Kantian and Enlightenment rationalism in Germany to the patriotic sentiment that impelled the club life of the eighteenth century in Koblenz? What do Goerres's oppositionality and the official responses to it tell us about the bumpy parturition of the public sphere in Germany over the course of the *Vormaerz*? What was the effect of Goerres's Catholic polemics in setting the long-term stage for the Protestant-Catholic conflicts of the later nineteenth century? Particularly in such a heavily intellectual biography, a bit more discussion of the penetration of Goerres's arguments into the intellectual life of the period and the perception of his contemporaries would have been of interest.

Some readers may find that Vanden Heuvel, while providing a great deal of useful information in the notes, tends to marginalize applicable historiographical and interpretive issues in the narrative--admittedly in service of the laudable goal of making Goerres's life into a consistent, comprehensible whole. He is largely successful in doing so. Vanden Heuvel makes Goerres into a vastly sympathetic figure, a role which Goerres surely did not play for many of his real-life contemporaries. This portrayal, too, raises its questions for the reader. If Goerres's thinking was indeed entirely understandable, one is tempted to ask, why

is it that most Germans did not think as Goerres did? This is a question that even this well-researched and on the whole successful biography has a hard time answering--the conclusion emphasizes Goerres's congenital lack of tact and acknowledges an inborn self-confidence that one contemporary described as bordering on egoism. The tension between Goerres as a representative figure of his age and as an oppositionally minded individualist whose pioneering thinking set the stage for a number of modern political and cultural trends is the governing dialectic of this deftly written book. If Goerres's dates and much of his thinking correspond naturally with the crucial dates of the development of the democratic thought and politics that are a major hallmark of modern history, Vanden Heuvel's book leaves the impression that Goerres's thinking always challenged the location of conventional intellectual and cultural perimeters, in times of peace as in times of crisis.

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