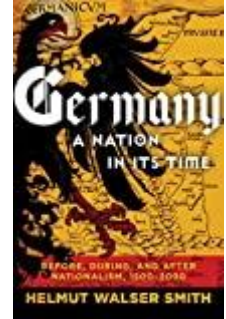


**Helmut Walser Smith.** *Germany: A Nation in Its Time; Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020. Illustrations. xvi + 590 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87140-466-4.



**Reviewed by** John Breuilly (London School of Economics)

**Published on** H-German (May, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Matthew Unangst (SUNY Oneonta)

## Essay in Review

Helmut Walser Smith's ambitious and important book mounts original arguments about Germany and Germans, nation and nationalism, from the late medieval period to the present. There are three themes. The main one sets the short history of German nationalism within the long history of the German nation. Smith further distinguishes between an "age of nationalism" and a "nationalist age." Just as Immanuel Kant, claiming his to be an "age of enlightenment," did not consider most of his contemporaries to be enlightened, so Smith names the period since the late eighteenth century an "age of nationalism." However, whereas Kant might consider that we have never had "an enlightened age," in other words, one dominated by Enlightenment values, Smith argues that Germany also had a "nationalist age," roughly coterminous with the era of the two world wars. A second theme is the place of war and peace in German history. Smith claims that peace, as much as war, is central to that history. The third theme concerns

what one might call "extended compassion" in literary realism. Smith draws on Erich Auerbach's pioneering work *Mimesis* (1953). Auerbach, with close analysis of passages in texts ranging from the Old Testament and Homer to twentieth-century novels, plotted the history of realism as a literary genre. He was especially concerned to show when and how this presented empathetic depictions of "ordinary" people, instead of ignoring or stereotyping them.

The view that nation has a long history and nationalism a short one is a contested one. Much hinges on definitions. If by "nation" we mean a strong and widespread sense of national identity, then many historians would consider nation—for most, if not all cases—to have a short history, either because there is no such sense, or at least good evidence for it. However, if by nation we mean elite discourse designating places and peoples as national, there is good evidence extending to medieval and earlier times. Part 1 of the

book considers such discourse. “Nationalism” also presents definitional problems. Smith’s account implies two notions of national identity: extent and quality. National identity is a minority sentiment in the “age of nationalism,” a majority one in “the nationalist age.” However, the focus on radical ethnic and race nationalism in this latter period suggests also that nationalism has a different quality in the “age of nationalism.”

Smith—understandably, given the scope of the book—concentrates on the German case, omitting theoretical and comparative analysis. He does refer to one major theorist—Ernest Gellner—when he states that part 2 of the book “tries to explain how this dramatic turn [that is: the emergence of nationalism] in the very meaning and significance of the term ‘nation’ came about, and how it is that nationalism did not ‘engender nations,’ as the philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner famously argued, but rather emerged as a new and powerful answer to the old question of what a nation is” (p. 90). However, if one regarded this “new and powerful answer” as a response to a *new* question about what a nation is, for example, a mass sentiment rather than an elite discourse, that question might require a very different answer. The continuity of the word “nation” might conceal a discontinuity of meaning. Whatever account one constructs—nationally focused, comparative, theoretical—to establish connections between nation and nationalism requires conceptual analysis as well as historical narrative.

Part 1 of the book is titled “The Nation before Nationalism.” The first chapter outlines pre-1700 conceptions of Germany as territory; the second discusses conceptions of Germans as nation; and the third examines Germany as a place where things happen to Germans. This is a nicely coherent scheme: nation as place, people, and experience.

The first chapter presents fascinating and original research on maps of Germany from about 1300. The first map of “Germania” Smith considers

—the Ebstorf map—was drawn around 1300. It links territory to people; on one extant copy is scrawled “the Rhine divides Gallicans and Germans” (p. 5). Smith traces the elaboration of these maps. They shift from “itinerary based” (routes between towns with estimated travel times) to maps drawn to scale and visualizing particular spaces, especially townscapes. They become more detailed and, with the onset of printing, numerous and widely circulated. It is doubtful whether many peasants or laborers “saw Germany,” but such maps formed part of the mental furniture of elites, such as sixteenth-century humanist scholars often regarded as early nationalists. By 1700 maps were acquiring such functions as compiling information on population and economic resources and accurately delineating boundaries to enable territorial claims by states.

Chapter 2 begins with linguistic and ethnic conceptions of “Germans.” A key text is the *Germania* of Tacitus, written in Rome about AD 100. It had not circulated in manuscript form in the medieval period—unlike works by other Roman writers—but was rediscovered in the fifteenth century and soon became available in print. Also with the advent of printing, Germany acquired a standard written form founded on the writings and Bible translations of Martin Luther, part of the Protestant drive to make God’s word accessible to “ordinary” Germans. This set off a propaganda and political counterattack from the Catholic Church and Catholic princes, even if they drew back from vernacular translations of the Bible.

Chapter 3 examines literary and visual depictions of German suffering during the Thirty Years’ War. It also introduces the other two themes. War stalked the German lands, where both Germans and non-Germans fought. Many accounts represent “ordinary” Germans as victims, portraying “realistically” the impact of war on them.

Smith concludes that by 1600 a German nation existed: as representations of place, people, language, and shared experience. He concedes

that these representations had no political meaning. “Germania” was divided into numerous polities, many joined with non-German lands and ruled by non-German princes. State boundaries lacked the precision or significance of later sovereign, territorial states. The most significant large-scale identity, that of Christianity, violently divided Germans.

This is a persuasive argument, but it needs conceptual scrutiny. “Nation” here is elite discourse and, as Smith notes, such discourse originated with the late Roman republic. The Roman “ethnographic” perspective in turn was shaped by classical Greek views. This is the view of urban imperial elites encountering non-urban peripheries populated by barbarians they must control or guard against. The “civilized” elites, conscious of their own complex social and political arrangements, imagine the barbarians as tribes: simple groups, organized by kinship and common culture. As Rome built an empire, its soldiers, politicians, and writers (often combined roles, namely, Julius Caesar) projected ethnic stereotypes onto particular places, shaped by how barbarians responded to imperialism.

These responses and counterresponses became increasingly complex and interrelated. Tacitus’s account of “Germans” anticipated the trope of the “noble savage,” enabling a critique of the perceived corruption and moral decline of Romans. “German” leaders learned from Romans. “Hermann the German,” whose forces wiped out a Roman legion in AD 9, was known then as Arminius, having served as a Roman officer. The stereotype of the red-haired, blue-eyed German barbarian Tacitus was probably obsolete in his own time, even supposing it had validity earlier. Many of his images were drawn from Caesar’s earlier accounts of Gaul. Tacitus subdivided Germans, linking these to a particular territory, and some editions of *Germania* include maps on the basis of these verbal accounts. Some of these names and places were

later revived, for example, the “Batavian” republic created in the low countries in the 1790s.

Such naming practices were widespread in the late medieval period: Francia, Germania, Italia, and such subdivisions as Saxony and Bavaria. One institutional name, that of the Holy Roman Empire, was first associated with Franks/Francia. (The name “Franks” traveled east, used to denote “western” invaders.) The phrase “of the German nation” was added later. This “empire,” based on decentralized, privileged landownership and the Catholic Church, had only the name in common with the Roman Empire. However, the title with its three components conferred huge prestige.

So “Germania” was one of a number of Roman ethnographic labels. The maps considered hardly develop this name any further. The key places are cities. “Tribal” ethnic stereotypes linger on in caricatures of the common people. “Realistic” representations abandon classical imagery. Smith cites the sixteenth-century mapmaker Rhenasus rejecting the ethnic stereotypes of Tacitus. By 1700, writers and artists did not represent Germans as a nation with a popular sense of identity, and Germania signified place in the same way as Italia and Francia.

As for nation as experience, Smith’s account suggests to me that Germans are simply the inhabitants of the suffering land of “Germania.” What makes this place special is its passivity. Comparison and reasonable speculation can support this claim. If the Reformation had engulfed the Italian Peninsula in violent conflict, it probably would have generated extensive accounts about “Italians” as victims. Indeed, Machiavelli depicted Italy as a divided and weak territory unable to resist foreign invasion. However, religious division and endemic warfare never became significant, and nor did such representations. By contrast, the unified polity of “Francia” was violently divided by confessional conflict. However, this was a civil war (the “Wars of Religion”), not outsiders viol-

ently imposing on the “French.” It is a distinctive combination of political fragmentation, confessional disunity, protracted warfare, and external interference that shapes how the concept of “Germania” is used, and not “being German.”

This is borne out by “internal” representations of Germany. The social detail is of townsmen, aristocrats, and churchmen. “Realistic” depictions of common people are not ethnic or national but social, comparable to what artists like Georges De La Tour and Pieter Bruegel the Elder were painting elsewhere. As Smith asserts: “Before the age of nationalism, Germans were pictured and labeled in costume books, on the margins of maps, and in descriptions of the world, as nobles and town dwellers. Only during the twilight of the old order would German intellectuals begin to conceive of the simple, rural Volk as standing for, and representing, the best of the nation” (p. 89). One could read that to mean that before the age of nationalism Germans *were not depicted in national terms*. Germany was an elite discourse shaped by Roman ethnography, lacking ethnic or political meaning. A standardized vernacular was forming, but of written, not spoken, German, in a largely nonliterate society, and paralleling trends elsewhere. Smith does not consider the recent early medieval historical investigations into “ethnogenesis.” My limited knowledge of this literature suggests that it links ethnogenesis to patterns of domination, closely related to the political culture of the Holy Roman Empire, a subject I will consider later.

Part 2 is titled “The Copernican Turn,” an interesting phrase. One can only understand Nicolaus Copernicus through his rejection of the prevalent earth-centered view of the solar system. However, this does not help us understand his work. What is significant is not only the discontinuity between the two views but also the methods and concepts that underpin them. What matters is the Copernican *destruction* of the earth-centered view.

By analogy, when connecting modern nationalism to premodern conceptions of nation, one could emphasize discontinuity and destruction. Hegel’s dialectic made this feature central to explanation. One can link this to Hegel’s understanding of national identity and its relationship to modernity. “Every nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints who live in the nation’s traditions, whose stories and deeds the nurse tells her charges and so wins them over by impressing their imagination.... In addition to these creatures of the imagination there also lives in the memory of most nations, especially free nations, the ancient heroes of their countries’ history.... Those heroes do not live solely in their nations’ imagination; their history, the recollection of their deeds is linked with public festivals, national games, with many of the state’s domestic institutions or foreign affairs, with well-known houses and districts with public memorials and temples.” This fits well with the story Smith is in the middle of telling. However, Hegel now registers disruption: “Christianity has emptied Valhalla, felled the sacred groves, extirpated the national imagery as shameful superstition, as a devilish poison and instead given us the imagery of a nation whose climate, laws, culture and interests are strange to us, whose history has no connection to our own. A David or Solomon lives in our popular imagination, but our country’s heroes slumber in learned history books.”[1]

Smith describes the extensive and recent destruction of the conditions that sustained earlier ideas of “Germania.” By the mid-eighteenth century, this land was again ravaged by war. However, now it was inflicted not by outsiders but by the two leading “German” powers. Prussia, which came close to destruction, emerged instead as a major power due to a genius leader, an astonishing and disciplined military mobilization, and a great deal of luck. Austria under Joseph II emulated Frederick the Great and turned his state into a territorial, bureaucratic, military power. A simil-

an organization of state power took place in Russia under Catherine the Great.

As Smith shows, nationality counted for nothing with these rulers. Frederick displayed open contempt for the “German” culture that intellectuals were constructing. His values, like those of Joseph and Catherine, were cosmopolitan and rational, looking to France as the place and language in which such values were most advanced. Together the three rulers destroyed the Polish polity. They swapped territory without regard to the interests or identities of their inhabitants, more concerned with how rich and populous, or strategically located, such regions were. Austria and Prussia sometimes invoked “German” interests but in relation to the Holy Roman Empire, not the German nation, and purely for instrumental purposes.

Smith also shows that the Holy Roman Empire was a victim of this politics. Thomas Abbt, a fierce advocate of patriotism, considering that “empire patriotism” had reached its “nadir,” sought to translate that sentiment to Prussia. Yet Abbt’s stipulations for doing this—popular participation in public life, fighting only defensive wars—were absent during the first, formative half of Frederick’s reign. This era of wars was sparked by his gratuitous invasion of Silesia, wars that Prussia pursued with drilled peasant conscripts under noble officers. Smith charts this decline of national sentiment and values into irrelevance in various fields, including mapmaking. He shows that “German” map projects failed for lack of support, while maps focused on state territory prospered, linked to better techniques and new functions like road building, and as governments precisely traced and monitored their borders.

This construction of an international system of competing bureaucratic-militarist states reached its apogee with Napoleon, its most powerful exponent and model. In 1804, the translation of Francis II, elective Holy Roman emperor, into Francis I, hereditary Austrian emperor, imitating

Napoleon who had months earlier declared himself emperor, exemplifies this. The hollow German and substantive imperial titles overlapped for less than two years before the German one was abolished. Its successor was the Confederation of the Rhine, a territorial designation for a grouping of medium-sized polities, most newly created, whose creator and “protector” was Napoleon.

Meanwhile, the term “empire” increasingly referred to the powerless south and west parts of the former empire, consisting largely of tiny polities governed by bishops, archbishops, urban patriates, and imperial knights. This fairytale world links to Smith’s account of Madame de Staël’s book *De Allemagne* (1813), depicting Germans as dreamers. Meanwhile, Friedrich Schiller consoled himself with the argument that Germany was a spiritual, not a material, force. Nation as culture opposes state as power.

The third element in a Hegelian dialectic is the synthesis that follows thesis and antithesis. It is precisely in this period that many historians locate the birth of modern German nationalism. Elie Kedourie commenced his pioneering study of nationalism with the striking sentence: “Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”[2] The book is a global history of ideas that starts with Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Smith considers early German romanticism and its project of imparting new content, energy, and significance to German culture. His account displays many original and telling touches, for example, on the tension between the Enlightenment writer Friedrich Nicolai and romantics like Herder who criticized Nicolai for his superficial account of travels in “Germany,” simply recording “surface” impressions rather than penetrating deeper. Romantics go “beneath the surface” with their explorations of *Volk* culture. However, it seems to me that even “romantic” accounts treat Germany as a place, not a shared national culture, and register differences of social position, confession, re-

gion, town, and country. They juxtapose Germany against equivalent places, such as Italy, France, and Poland. They have no political program. The stress on “interiority” accompanies political quietism, even if this may be, as with Schiller, resignation posing as virtue.

This raises a problem. If an idea has been formulated at one time but remains confined to the private realm of intellectual elites, and if that idea much later figures centrally in claims made and realized by political forces, is it the “same” idea writ large? Is then the history of nationalism the translation of an idea about nation into a political project? If this idea also only exists given a prior concept of nation, then Smith’s sequence—nation, nationalism as elite idea, nationalism as popular sentiment—works well. However, one must make explicit and examine the conceptual assumptions involved.

The career of Ernst Moritz Arndt provides a good opportunity to do this because his own life appears to exemplify this sequence and Smith provides us with key details. Arndt was born in 1769 (the same year as his hate figure Napoleon) in Pomerania, then under Swedish rule. He studied at Prussian universities and began but did not complete training to be a Lutheran pastor. He was influenced by Herder (another north German Lutheran) and his argument that language shaped human nature and, as language was national, human nature took diverse national forms. Arndt shared Herder’s animus against the French Enlightenment and its cosmopolitan pretensions.

In 1798, after a life spent in eastern regions of Prussia, Arndt first saw the Rhine. He was deeply impressed by the ruins, part historic, part result of recent wars waged by revolutionary France. Although Arndt had initially sympathized with the French Revolution, he, like many other European intellectuals, turned against it as it radicalized. These successive phases—imbibing views about German language, culture, and nationality; disenchantment with the French Revolution; seeing the

war-ravaged Rhinelands—primed Arndt to nurse a bitter hatred of the “French” for what they had done to the “Germans.”

Yet the Arndt of this time occupied a very different position from the author of the pamphlet of 1813, *The Rhine, Germany’s River, but Not Germany’s Boundary*, and the lyrics to the song “Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?” These and other writings established Arndt as the most popular nationalist writer of his time. By contrast, in 1798, he was an obscure intellectual from eastern Prussia visiting a strange land. In a journal Smith quotes, Arndt seemed resigned to a long period of French rule over the Rhinelands, even envisaging its inhabitants turning from German into French speakers. If Germany is to be found wherever the German tongue is heard—as “Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?” asserts—Arndt in 1798 gloomily forecast that the Rhinelands would soon cease to be German.

The shift from obscurity to celebrity happened quickly. Smith cites the low print runs of key “nationalist” texts, such as Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807-8), to show how limited their impact was before 1814. The obvious reason for the shift is the reversal of power relationships in 1812-13 as Napoleon’s invasion of Russia failed and his armies retreated westward, pursued by an ever-growing coalition of the other major powers. Arndt was now secretary to Baron Stein, former prime minister of Prussia, who served Tsar Alexander, and was charged with the task of administering newly occupied German territories. All the major states launched propaganda offensives against France. German nationalism, in various forms, was one element in these.

To understand fully the different meanings of German national(ist) discourse and the rapid changes these underwent, and to relate these meanings to changes in Arndt’s role and thought, we must turn back to the period from the late eighteenth century to 1815. I start with the Holy Roman Empire, a subject somewhat neglected by

Smith. This is understandable. It is difficult to take the empire seriously. Knowing that modern Europe will be dominated by territorial, sovereign states, most of which we call “nation-states,” the disappearance of the empire appears a necessary step toward modern Germany. The contrast between power and the empire had already become a cliché. It was heightened by the “Prussian” school of historians who celebrated the achievement of 1871, consigning the empire to the rubbish heap of history. However, this perspective can be questioned.

As Smith has shown, the Thirty Years’ War deprived “Germania” of any political significance. After 1740, wars between Austria and Prussia (1740-48, 1756-63, 1778-79), followed by the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, undermined and destroyed the empire. However, this leaves almost a century of relative peace in between. In that time, the empire revived politically and shaped a German political culture. This is not to be found in cartographic, romantic, or Prussian-centered discourses of “Germania.”

The year 1648 confirmed the end of Catholic Habsburg hegemony within the empire. It heralded a largely successful effort to handle confessional disputes within and between members of the empire in such a way as to forestall violence and war. It enhanced the power of the imperial estates—mainly an order of territorial princedoms—against subordinate institutions, such as provincial estates. The outcome was that imperial institutions functioned well, turning intra-imperial disputes into matters for courts not armies and coordinating opposition to powerful outsiders, such as France and the Ottoman Empire.

This achievement has been overshadowed by the next era of war. Yet many who played leading roles in that era had been socialized into an imperial political culture. This left its mark after 1806. The Confederation of the Rhine drew on the imperial constitution by conferring “internal” sovereignty on its members while denying them “ex-

ternal” sovereignty. That distinction—difficult to grasp in modern terms but important in contemporary practice—continued in the German Confederation (*Deutsche Bund*, henceforth *Bund*) set up in 1814-15, which was to last, apart from one short period between 1848 and 1851, until 1867. “External” sovereignty, principally the power to make international agreements with foreign states, was jointly vested in Austria and Prussia. This was legitimized by their possession of territory beyond that of the *Bund*, which meant they were both members and not members of the *Bund*. All the other members, being wholly within the *Bund*, could only manage internal affairs.[3] These features survived in the constitution of the North German Confederation, established by Otto von Bismarck following the defeat of Austria in 1866, and are encountered again in the Imperial Constitution of 1871. Federalism continued in the Weimar Republic and was revived in the Federal Republic, continuing into the present.

This enduring political culture was condemned or derided by German nationalists. It did not cover all of “Germany,” certainly in Arndt’s vision, and even more so following the exclusion of German Austria from “Germany.” Nationalists deplored “particularism.” Conversely, advocates of “federalism” opposed a unitary nation-state.

With this political dimension of nation and nationalism in mind, I return to the Napoleonic period. As Smith shows, this was a crucial moment in the formation of nationalist ideology, expressed in art, poetry, song, literature, and much else. Equally, as Smith shows, this is when German nationalism in any political form is insignificant. The only political expression of Germany disappeared with the Holy Roman Empire in 1806.

In western Germany, a new state system was imposed by France: through direct incorporation as French *départements*, “satellite” states ruled by members of Napoleon’s family or entourage, and the granting of new territories and titles to German princes. The political elite accepted Napo-

leon's "external" sovereignty while zealously pursuing French-style reforms internally. There was little sign of popular discontent, especially once war zones moved east.

Following defeats by Napoleon in 1805 and 1809, the Habsburg Empire sought cooperation with Napoleon, treated as a fellow dynast. Klemens von Metternich, deeply hostile to popular movements and national sentiments, took over after the disastrous flirtation with German nationalism in 1809. Recalling the Habsburg motto "let others wage war: thou, happy Austria, marry," Metternich arranged marriage between Maria, the daughter of Emperor Francis, and Napoleon. The German imperial tradition was echoed by conferring on their son the title "King of the Romans."

The apparent exception to this national indifference was Prussia, shattered by the defeat of 1806-7. Yet, before that defeat, Prussia had in 1793 withdrawn from the war against France (gaining Hannover in the bargain), remained aloof from subsequent anti-French coalitions, and then faced Napoleon alone in 1806. Intellectuals, officers, and high civil servants were deeply affected by defeat: materially through loss of position (for example, officers dismissed due to the enforced reduction in army size), morally by loss of prestige. Some focused on how to reverse this disaster. The road to the nation-state is often depicted as the convergence of Prussian state recovery and German nationalism.

This is problematic. At the popular level, there was little active opposition (though much passive resentment) to defeat, and no encouragement from the government. Its main concern was negotiating subordination to Napoleon. Army reforms that contributed to later military success were one response to the massive reduction in the size of the army. Financial and constitutional reforms later hailed as ways of stimulating enthusiasm for war against Napoleon were principally concerned with raising revenue to pay off French indemnity and off-loading administration costs onto localit-

ies. Indeed, so disgusted at the supine attitude of Frederick William III were some officials that they left Prussia to serve other rulers prepared to oppose Napoleon. Baron Stein (dismissed on the insistence of Napoleon) went to Austria in 1809, then to Russia.

Such "nationalist" reactions hardly worried Napoleon. Fichte feared that the lectures he gave in occupied Berlin, the *Addresses to the German Nation*, rightly regarded as a key text in formulating German nationalist ideology, might lead to his arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. The French ignored him. Fichte focused on language and education as ways to cultivate national feeling, typical of the romantic preoccupation with "interiority." What worried the French was active resistance, whether guerrilla warfare, assassinations, or civil disobedience. Little of that transpired. Subsequent nationalist accounts sought to make a meal of the rare exceptions. Where there was powerful opposition—notably the guerrilla movement in the Tyrol led by Andreas Hofer—it was favored by a mountainous topography and animated by localist and Habsburg loyalties. It was repressed by Bavarian soldiers.

However, something unprecedented began around 1811 without which subsequent events cannot be understood. The agreement between France and Russia was breaking down on the issue of Napoleon's Continental Blockade aimed at Britain. Napoleon decided to coerce Russia back into cooperation. His preparations for war became the greatest military mobilization in European history. Hundreds of thousands of men of all nationalities were conscripted, and huge amounts of livestock, carts, clothing, weapons and much else were seized. This preparation, and the Russian response, spread across Europe. This generated a deep and pervasive hatred of France, especially its ruler, the "Corsican Tyrant." (The phrase interestingly distances Napoleon from the French.)

That hatred was magnified by the war. "German nationalism" was one expression of this



hatred. Arndt was perfectly positioned to be its chief voice. That is easily explained. What is difficult, if not impossible, is to measure its importance relative to other sentiments. These included religion (Christian against godless France, Protestant, or Orthodox against Catholic France), dynastic loyalty, narrow localism, and nostalgia for the “good, old days.” These were mixed up in many people’s minds. Any diachronic account of “German nationalism” must be complemented by a synchronic account of this “existential crisis” across Europe.

Smith begins the post-1815 period with an interesting treatment of Friedrich Gentz, the radical turned conservative, and adviser to Metternich at the Congress of Vienna. His views anticipated those of Bismarck. Gentz debunked myths of the “war of liberation,” which exaggerated the role of German nationalism, just as Bismarck did right before 1848. Gentz considered that the most powerful sentiments at work were hatred and war weariness, just as Bismarck later stressed these as more important than ideological enthusiasm. Metternich was more in tune with such a mood than student nationalists, radical democrats, or constitutionalist liberals. Military retrenchment and diplomatic manipulation suited this mood. However, if one considers nationalism as an activist creed seeking to overturn existing political arrangements and building on “nation” as a long-existing sense of identity, this is puzzling. Indeed, it would seem—in Smith’s terms—that we are in retreat from “the age of nationalism,” rather than getting closer to “the nationalist age.”

“National” ideas do become more important and widespread, though this is a local variant on a pan-European trend. This is fascinatingly illustrated in Smith’s treatment of the Grimm brothers. Many of their “German folktales” were obtained from “a small group of well-educated French women, most of them from French-speaking Huguenot families, none of whom are mentioned in the first edition” (p. 211). This was typical and

European-wide. The database produced by the SPIN (Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms) project led by Joep Leerssen in Amsterdam includes maps tracing intellectual networks in nineteenth-century Europe. The Grimm brothers appear central in some of these networks. A synchronic approach that treats them as one element in a European-wide intellectual network needs to complement a diachronic national frame.

This is another epoch of peace for the German lands. (Between 1815 and 1859 neither Austria nor Prussia waged war against a major power.) There are many reasons—some adduced by Smith, such as communications improvements—to regard this period as crucial for the formation of a more widespread sense of national identity than had existed previously, bearing little resemblance or connection to earlier elite discourses about the nation. However, it is not “nationalism,” if by that we mean an ideological program to fashion a powerful Germany.

The formation of a distinctive bourgeois culture includes popular periodicals, increased book circulation, art exhibitions, and concerts, all commercially oriented to a national “public,” not to patronage. This culture is often called *Biedermeier*, derived from a comfortable style of furniture. It is nostalgic and sentimental. It is held in contempt by intellectuals who would have concurred with Matthew Arnold when he coined the epithet “philistine” for something similar in Victorian England. Yet it is an aspect of the “everyday” life of bourgeois inhabitants of towns spread across the German lands.

There is also a political dimension of “national but not nationalist.” Restored regimes—though highly realistic in combining a rhetoric of restoration with adapting Napoleonic innovations to their own purposes, notably, the formation of larger, bureaucratic, secular states—exaggerated out of genuine fear and for instrumental purposes the danger of “revolutionary” ideas like romantic nationalism and democratic radicalism. Such exag-

generation had real consequences, and not just for a minority of radical nationalists and democrats, who were easily marginalized. Despite such popular events as the Hambach Festival and widespread unrest in 1830-32, it is the stability of the post-1815 political arrangements that is striking. Governments also blocked moderate liberal reforms. The Bund—through Austrian and Prussia cooperation—coordinated this. The unintended consequence was to shift the focus of reformers to the national level of the Bund.

These reformers did not encounter harsh repression. Few resources went into coordinating political policing across states. Many state officials were sympathetic to liberal reforms, indeed were often the leading figures pressing for them. Such people communicated common ideas across state boundaries and even, from the late 1830s, formed national associations.

Post-1815 Germany thus exhibits the growth of an authentically national, middle-class culture that is sentimental, apolitical, and pacific, and of a national politics that is an aggregation of state-level, liberal movements forced by mild repression up to the “German” level. This culture and politics is unlike the strenuous idealism of radical democrats and romantic nationalists. Such intellectuals, rarer after 1815, if not intimidated or jailed, went into exile, like Georg Büchner whom Smith considers. As exiles, many depict “real, existing Germany” as docile and philistine.

These different meanings of national and nationalism become sharply apparent in 1848. The revolutions were a Europe-wide event, stopping short at Scandinavia, Britain, Iberia, and Russia. They were not pressed forward from one revolutionary center, as in the 1790s by France and after 1917 by the Soviet Union. They were not responses to a major crisis. They shared many features. However, there was one uniquely German feature. Elsewhere the politics of revolution focused on existing states. France, a centralized state, had a

centralized revolution. Italy, a collection of separate states, had a collection of separate revolutions.

By contrast, in Germany, although state-level revolutions were fundamental, they were paralleled by a national revolution. By May 1848, just three months after the outbreak, elections for a national assembly based on universal manhood suffrage were conducted—for the most part in an orderly and effective manner—throughout the territories of the Bund. This was an astonishing “national” achievement. It was not the work of romantic or radical nationalists but of reformers, mainly liberals, rooted in the shared culture and political concerns of the broad middle class formed in post-1815 Germany.

Smith has little to say about this national revolution. The experience of national elections, the growth of a diverse and widely read political press, the increasingly sharp divisions between different political positions (liberal, radical, Catholic, conservative, socialist): all this meant that nationally shared but also divisive political concerns were erected on top of a national “culture.” The counterrevolution was more thorough than post-1815 repression, but ironically this made clearer that people across the German lands shared a political fate as well as a culture. Furthermore, even though it “failed,” the German National Assembly turned the “national question” from vague utopian discourse into a set of clear political questions.

This began with questions about what was meant by “Germany” and “German.” The key answers were civic and statist. As a polity Germany was called an empire. As a place, Germany was defined in Article 1 of the Imperial Constitution of 1849 as “the territory of the former German Federation” (in other words, the Bund). As a nation, the “German people consist of the states which make up the Reich” (Article 131). The only recognition of cultural identity comes in Article 188: “The non-German speaking people of Germany are guaranteed their national development, namely equal

rights for their languages, in so far as they exist in their territories, in ecclesiastical matters, in education, in administration of local affairs and of justice.”[4] A German citizen is not the same as a German speaker, and citizenship is defined in federal terms, that is, as being a citizen of a state that is a member of the Reich.

The unenacted 1849 constitution enumerated the rights and duties of German citizens, whereas the enacted constitution of 1871 simply referred to provisions by member states. A Prussian subject (this term and that of state member is usually preferred to that of citizen) in Saxony had the rights and duties of a Saxon subject, and vice versa. One might think this made the 1849 constitution less “realistic” than that of 1871. However, after 1871, it was increasingly realized that one needed to specify national rights and duties and to construct institutions to implement these. The “failed” constitution of 1849 became a model for how the “successful” one of 1871 was drafted and then subsequently revised.

The counterrevolution suppressed dissent efficiently. However, it could not eradicate the memory of the revolution or the formation of a necessary, if limited, sphere of communication and association based on an increasingly dynamic, market-driven economy. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, this had put the “national question” back into politics. The memory of 1848 meant that there were no illusions that Vienna and Berlin might cooperate in the formation of a nation-state or that this might be imposed from below by a popular movement. This was the age of “realism.”

Smith begins his post-1848 chapter with artistic realism. He makes the point that Germany lacked any realist novelist to match a Victor Hugo or a Charles Dickens. With typical originality, he starts with an account of George Eliot, another great realist novelist, in 1850s Germany. There follow vignettes on Wilhelm Riehl, the pioneering sociologist, and the “realist” artist Adolph Menzel. It is not clear how to relate these subjects to nation-

alism or realism. As Smith notes, Riehl became increasingly “unrealistic” with his nostalgic representation of peasants and the inhabitants of “home towns,” even if he also conducted interviews. (Compare him to Henry Mayhew, a much more “realistic” sociologist.) Smith recognizes that Menzel’s “realism” was largely unappreciated in his own time and that he was best known, and celebrated by the establishment, for his historical restorations, especially from the reign of Frederick the Great, and his contemporary paintings of court scenes.

Smith registers the economic growth and technological innovation (especially railway building) and their impact on the continued expansion of a national culture and on state power, above all, its military aspect. The problem is how to connect these to the themes of nation and nationalism. One way might be to note also the growth of “political realism.” Politicians oriented to the growing working class, especially influenced by Karl Marx, came to see the future as the impersonal evolution of economic structures and classes, not the pursuit of utopias or incremental reforms. “Realpolitik” was a term coined by August von Rochau, an idealistic liberal who now envisaged a middle-class liberal society being promoted by the calculated use of power to solve the “national question.” That use of power—“blood and iron”—was signaled by that “realistic conservative” Bismarck shortly after being appointed Prussian prime minister. His realism included taking account of what he called the “social forces” being shaped by economic change.

More and more people thought and felt national. Many elites—military, entrepreneurial, professional—considered that the current political arrangements in the German lands could not endure. German unification was long anticipated and desired. However, there was little enthusiasm for heroic, high-risk, violent “solutions,” and, as Smith notes, this mood prevailed in public opinion when Austria and Prussia went to war in 1866.

This increasing sense of German national identity hardly bears comparison with earlier conceptions of the nation Smith has described. Conventionally the term “nationalism” is used by historians to refer to that minority who actively pursued ways of making Germany a major power, usually through nation-state formation. However, this minority was divided. Its various components—“little” or “greater” German nationalists, democratic nationalists, etc.—are not considered by Smith.

The first time we can credibly observe “nationalism” in the sense of unified popular support for a national cause is the war against France in 1870-71. As Smith writes: “The war transformed nationalist sentiment” (p. 258). I would elaborate that point: the war turned an increasingly extensive but apolitical national sense of identity into a moment of intense popular unity. However, that was just a moment. Before the end of the 1870s, the state was persecuting workers and their main political party. In the 1880s this extended to Catholics. Radical democrats and left liberals were excluded from central government. By 1900 a majority of the electorate voted for oppositional parties. As Smith points out, the state spurned national symbols like the red-white-gold flag and the anthem “Deutschland, über alles.” Smith describes the increased circulation of objects that could promote an everyday sense of national identity, such as stamps, monuments, postcards with images of Kaiser Wilhelm I, and beer mugs given to soldiers. Might such practices extend earlier senses of “the nation”?

Answering this in the affirmative relates to the seminal work by Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (1995), which Smith cites. “Luke-warm” everyday national sentiment is juxtaposed to “hot” nationalism, which appears at times of crisis. Billig argues that everyday identity is a necessary condition for the flaring up of popular nationalism. The argument relies on certain assumptions. First, nationalism is identified as an intense mo-

ment in the popular mood, rather than, for example, a political ideology or the program of a political party or government. Second, to explain why this mood can emerge so suddenly, one refers to everyday sentiments that exist largely unobserved. The telling image Billig invokes is the limp flag at half-mast.

However, it is difficult to show that things unobserved actually exist. Most of the literature on banal nationalism focuses on *production*—whether of stamps, monuments, or beer mugs. *Reception* is another matter. Before the time of opinion surveys and polls we know little about this and must speculate. One can engage in different speculations. Many working-class men hated conscription. Might, therefore, beer mugs issued upon discharge elicit resentment rather than patriotism? Some monuments appear to have been erected more to attract tourism than to instill national identity. Workers and Catholics had their own non-national, even anti-national anniversaries. May Day probably meant more to workers than Sedan Day. Yet, in a negative way, one could argue that anti-national resentment and rituals themselves increased a sense of national identity.

If popular nationalism is linked to rare intense moments, such as the outbreak of war, might there be other ways to connect such intense moments to the “banal” times in between? One might be to consider nationalism as political ideology and movement, and the national as the frame for political action. There was the growth of explicit nationalist ideology, increasingly expressed in race and ethnic terms, and taken up by a range of extra-parliamentary organizations like the Navy League. Smith provides detail on leading advocates, such as Heinrich Class. As for nation as political frame, the nation-state shaped the focus of increasingly well-organized and popular political parties. The best supported of these parties did not foreground nationalism but rather social concerns rooted in socialist or religious values. Why they

became “nationalist” in the next intense moment of 1914 needs further consideration.

The next section—“The Nationalist Age”—begins with violence and death. Military expenditure (see graph on page 296) climbed to unprecedented heights during the First World War and then, after a brief decline in Weimar Germany, rose again up to and during the Second World War. Deaths due to war—military and civilian, direct and indirect—increased sharply, with civilian deaths especially marked after 1941. This was a Europe-wide experience, if more extreme in Germany than elsewhere.

One frequently encounters the phrase—on gravestones and war memorials—that these deaths, especially of young men in the armed forces, were “sacrifices for the nation.” Smith takes this notion of sacrifice and distinguishes between sacrifice *for* and sacrifice *of* lives. He draws on a mass of evidence, such as soldiers’ letters, exhibiting this sense of national duty. This does not make these soldiers supporters of explicit nationalism. Smith shows how “sacrifice for” changes into “sacrifice of.” An especially powerful passage on the painter and sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, who had supported her school-age son, Peter, in joining the army and was grief-stricken when he was killed, shows how she turned against the war when she concluded that it was not about defense and that the people had been lied to and manipulated. “Sacrifice for” became “sacrifice of.”

These are important arguments but would have been enhanced by connections to “everyday” national identity and national(ist) politics. Enthusiasm for war and dutiful defense of the nation are different sentiments even if they produce the same actions at a particular moment. For example, the Socialist Party in 1912 and 1913 organized massive anti-war demonstrations. In 1914, although party leaders included a few enthusiastic nationalists, far more important were concerns about the Russian threat. War in 1914 appeared defensive, unlike in 1912 and 1913. (The govern-

ment calculated that Russian mobilization, preceding that of Germany, would enable it to exploit this defensive anxiety.) Party leaders anticipated the destruction of the party if it opposed the war, while conversely calculating the advantages of becoming part of a national effort.

“National unity” was a complex combination of different sentiments and actions, at popular and political levels. Smith mentions Max Weber who, as a nationalist and sociologist, embodied such complexity. Weber located enthusiastic nationalism in the ranks of the intelligentsia, the bourgeoisie, and state civil and military elites. Such enthusiasm could encompass the lower middle class, though ebbing and flowing. However, unlike English nationalism, it had not reached the working class. Weber, initially an administrator of a military hospital, was pleasantly surprised by the prevalence of the sense of national duty he observed among the working-class wounded. He was alert to the fragility of such sentiments. He regarded the enthusiastic nationalists of the Fatherland Party, formed during the war, as anti-national because their irresponsible war aims risked defeat and popular disenchantment.

This suggests to me that in 1914 we are *already* in Smith’s “nationalist age,” understood not as the promotion of expanding German power but as a matter-of-fact acceptance of national identity, and the nation-state (as opposed to the government of the day) as its political instrument. This enabled the unity of August 1914 while concealing, at popular and political levels, different, even opposed, values. What is new is an aggressively racial and ethnic nationalism (henceforth “radical nationalism”) achieving mass support and political expression.

Smith now focuses on radical nationalism. That is a large and complex subject and Smith’s treatment of it is brilliant, for example, in the way he uses Reinhart Koselleck’s binary distinctions of before/after, above/below, and inside/outside to bring out what is distinctive about this national-

ism. Smith has less to say about other kinds of national sentiment and nationalist politics.

Across Europe, including Germany, the war “nationalized” identity but not always accompanied by significant radical nationalism. As Smith notes, Weimar was the first “real” German nation-state: adopting the flag and anthem created by mid-nineteenth-century democratic nationalists, imposing uniform constitutions on the constituent states, introducing universal adult suffrage for elections to a sovereign parliament, and replacing a hereditary monarch with an elected president. Apart from the newly established Communist Party, all the major parties shared a positive sense of national identity and opposed the Treaty of Versailles as unjust to the German nation. Smith makes the important point that there was a left-wing version of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community), but positive national identity included many other political visions.

Smith considers the demography of suffering (physical and psychological, orphans, widows). He analyzes radical nationalism. However, if almost everyone, and all but one political party, shared a positive view of the nation, were they not nationalists in some sense? If most of them rejected radical nationalism (from the late 1920s equated with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party) at the polls, were they rejecting “nationalism”?

The interaction between these two conceptions of nationalism—strong and shared national identity with sharp political differences, and radical nationalism—is crucial for understanding Hitler’s rise to power. How far was it a matter of converting non-radical nationalists to Nazi ideology? How far was it a process of persuading voters that other parties were less able to represent their existing interests? How much did a broadly shared national identity contribute to this process?

Smith’s focus on radical nationalism continues. His treatment of the years 1933 to 1939, above all antisemitic rhetoric, measures, and actions, is

detailed and powerful. He shows how the regime destroyed public dissent and subjected the population to blanket propaganda. If accompanied by material improvements and linking regime ideology to broadly shared values, it could appear that a *Volksgemeinschaft* had been formed.

This focus on radical nationalism culminates in the chapter on the war years, “Death Spaces.” This is based on wide reading and deep thinking about the mass killings carried out by the Third Reich. There might be debates about some of Smith’s arguments, for example, the degree of popular knowledge and/or complicity or the perpetrators as “ordinary” Germans. However, the overall account seems to me—a nonexpert in the vast literature on the subject—powerful and persuasive.

The post-1945 section of the book is titled “After Nationalism.” The focus is on popular opinion, with the implication that this is not about nationalism, and omits nationalism as politics. Smith concentrates on the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), contending that there is insufficient evidence on popular opinion in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Certainly West Germany with its liberal public sphere and contested elections provides the best evidence. Yet, by comparison with earlier periods that Smith does consider, East Germany provides abundant, if different, kinds of data. Like the Third Reich, the East German regime monitored its subjects through an elaborate security apparatus. As with the Third Reich, much of this surveillance material survived the regime. Smith also omits Austria, which after 1945 was busy forgetting its “German” past. All this might have made an already huge subject unmanageable, but one should note these omissions.

Again, Smith’s account is powerful and persuasive. He notes that the war did not end for Germans in mid-1945. If war means the daily, mass experience of violence, imprisonment, expulsions, unnaturally high death rates, life in a blasted land,

and the destruction of the “normal” family, then the war for Germans arguably started in 1941 and finished in about 1947. The major preoccupation became survival. Life between 1933 and 1941 contrasted favorably with that under foreign occupiers who preached to the population. Smith reports polls showing the long survival of positive views of the Third Reich. In 1952, the Allensbach Institute asked what Smith aptly calls a “remarkable question”: “Would you say it is better if Germany did not have any Jews in the country?” A total of 37 percent of respondents said yes, 24 percent were not sure, and only 20 percent answered no. As late as 1961, a poll showed 74 percent of respondents considering Jews to be of a different race, while only 10 percent said the same of the English (p. 429).

Smith charts the decline of such views and what succeeded them. This is a complex history that Smith relates to material improvements from the 1950s and increasing acceptance of the postwar world, including acceptance of West Germany as part of the “West,” while East Germany as part of an alien, threatening “East.” In the account of changing attitudes toward Germany’s past, especially the Third Reich, what I found most striking was not the well-known issues, such as the impact of daily televised broadcasts of the Adolf Eichmann trial and documentaries and dramas about the Holocaust, but the subtle changes in how particular “victims” were remembered. Smith points to expansion of empathy, moving from private and sacred commemorations of loved ones killed in the war toward public and secular memorials for groups of “others.” This extension of empathy was accompanied by remarkable national self-criticism.

A telling example is from the southwest town of Emmendingen. In 1968, the town erected a plaque on the site of a synagogue that recorded: “1821 newly built—1922/23 expanded—1938 destroyed.” It is a factual and impersonal recording of a Jewish presence and its destruction. In 1988, the

plaque was replaced by one that stated that the synagogue was “demolished and torn down by the citizens of Emmendingen” and the “Jewish community was extinguished.” As Smith notes: “The language in 1988 was more precise, the focus on the community more truthful, and a sense of the tragic dimension of what happened palpable” (p. 446). One might note that almost all those who had torn down the synagogue were dead by 1988, while those now accepting “collective responsibility” belonged to a postwar generation. Nevertheless, in a world of nations it remains remarkable. Consider the hostile response in the United Kingdom to revelations about how the colonial state treated Kenyans during the “emergency” of the 1950s, or the recent debate about removing from public display statues erected to men who had made their fortunes as slave traders. Similar points could be made about France and Algeria, the United States and the Confederacy, and many other nation-states.

Smith rightly considers this distinctively German. When the conservative politician Franz-Josef Strauss criticized the 1985 speech of the West German president Richard von Weizsäcker, he unwittingly underscored this. Weizsäcker, precisely forty years after the official end of the war, talked about the crimes of the Third Reich, the mass murder of Jews, and the complicity of ordinary Germans, concluding that “all of us, guilty or not, old or young, must take on this past” (p. 450). Strauss responded that a “normal nation” should not indulge in such paralyzing, ongoing national contrition, correctly implying that “normal” nations did not do this.

He was, however, wrong to regard this as “paralyzing.” A dark past had been confronted in a uniquely national manner. So too was a dark present, as indicated by the massive demonstrations (far bigger in unified Germany than France or the United Kingdom) protesting attacks on and murders of immigrants. Yet this has come to be combined with pleasure in national achievements,

as Smith saw in Berlin in 2006 when Germans celebrated its football team's World Cup success, even if only third place. This was also an increasingly multicultural Germany, brought about by increases in immigration and changes in citizenship law.

This is a special story about German national identity. However, there are other meanings of nation and nationalism. First, along with an encompassing sense of national identity, there were different, even competing, views of the nation. A second-generation "Turk," quite possibly celebrating Turkey's World Cup quarter-final triumph in 2002, as I observed personally in central Berlin, but educated in a *Gymnasium* and German university, and holding German citizenship, is in certain respects more "German," certainly "differently German," than someone who had grown up in East Germany or an "ethnic German" from Russia. However, they are all "German."

This pervasive sense of nation Sinisa Malešević has called "grounded nationalism" in a book of that title (*Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis* [2019]). It is within such a frame that more specifically nationalist ideologies and movements contend. The combinations vary between states and over time. Recently there has been a rapid growth of comparative political science analysis of "populist nationalism," which includes Germany as but one case. There is also a longer history of contention between more conventional political ideologies, such as social democracy, liberalism, and conservatism, all of which affirm national identity but fill that empty identity claim with different views of the national ideal.

Smith has outlined a history about how the idea of "Germany" and "German" originated; how this was molded by minorities into nationalism from the late eighteenth century; how this nationalism became radical, ethnic, and racial, and increasingly dominant in the era of the world wars; and how since 1945 Germans have confronted and rejected that nationalism. My criticisms begin

with the absence of explicit definitions of the key terms as this would have made it easier to see what is and what is not considered. I think there are problems about connecting an early modern elite discourse about Germany as place to a late modern, widespread, and popular sense of Germans as people, as well as the shift from nationalism as a minority idea to nationalism as radical ethno-nationalism. I would have liked something on the national as an aspect of political culture, especially in relation to what one might consider a federal tradition. Finally, I would have liked a synchronic perspective that would show German nation and nationalism as deeply shaped by events and ideas beyond Germany.

However, Smith has tackled a huge subject, and it is quite impossible for one historian, let alone one book, to tell the whole story. My criticisms disclose my own partiality, above all in the fields of political culture and institutions. In the fields Smith favors, he provides unique detail and telling insights. I will mention just two among many. The cartographic research and analysis are impressive and revealing. 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 illuminating. This is an ambitious, beautifully written, highly original book on the huge and complex subject of German nation and nationalism.

#### Notes

[1]. These quotations are from an English translation of Hegel's *Positivity of the Christian Religion* reproduced in Gopal Balakrishnan, "The National Imagination," in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), 202.

[2]. Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1962), 1.

[3]. Where other Bund members were linked to a non-member, as was the case with Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark, and Hannover and Great Britain, this was treated as a personal union em-



bodied in the monarch, not an institutional one signifying a single state. The Bund also had certain rights of intervention in the internal affairs of Bund members. This would become significant, especially between 1819 and 1848, and gained the Bund a reputation as a reactionary institution used by Austria and Prussia to block constitutional reform in other states.

[4]. See the English translation of the constitution in Elmar M. Hucko, ed., *The Democratic Tradition: Four German Constitutions* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987).

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 Breuilly. Review of Smith, Helmut Walser. *Germany: A Nation in Its Time; Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56561>



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