

**Alexa Geisthoevel.** *Eigentümlichkeit und Macht. Deutscher Nationalismus 1830-1851. Der Fall Schleswig-Holstein.* Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 256 pp. EUR 79.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-515-08090-3.



**Reviewed by** Abigail Green

**Published on** H-German (July, 2004)

It is a truism that the Schleswig-Holstein question was one of the most complex and intractable diplomatic problems of the nineteenth century and a long-standing flashpoint in European politics. To recap briefly: the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were both ruled by the King of Denmark until 1864, although Holstein, which had a German-speaking majority, was part of the German Confederation and Schleswig, which had a more significant Danish population, was not. This complex situation generated a series of important dilemmas and questions for German nationalists, preoccupied with defining the nature of German nationhood and the boundaries of any future nation state, and eager to establish Germany as a force to be reckoned with on the international stage.

At two critical moments in the history of nineteenth-century Germany—in 1848 and again in 1864—the Schleswig-Holstein question triggered war between "Germany" and the Kingdom of Denmark. During the first of these conflicts, Germany, represented by Prussia, came to terms with Denmark, underlining the centrality of Prussian power for the embryonic German nation state, and

forcing many nationalists to reconfigure their nationalism in more pragmatic and less idealistic terms. Prussia showed a similar disregard for German nationalist feeling during the second of these wars, ignoring public opinion and the express wishes of the German Confederation to fight alongside Austria in the "liberation" of the duchies from Danish rule. In the long term, this conflict led to Austro-Prussian war of 1866, which resulted from the failure of the German Great Powers to divide the spoils of 1864 equitably and led to the permanent exclusion of Austria from the emergent German nation state.

It is rather surprising that the Schleswig-Holstein question has not received more scholarly attention, given its central importance to the process of German unification. Alexa Geisthoevel's thoughtful and interesting book goes some way to filling this gap. Geisthoevel does not seek to provide a blow-by-blow account of the development of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis as a diplomatic problem. Her aims are fundamentally different. Rather than trace the evolution of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, she seeks to understand how and why Schleswig-Holstein emerged as a

rallying cry for the German nationalist movement in the 1840s and what this process can tell us about the nature of German nationalism during this period.

Geisthoevel locates her analysis within two distinct historiographical debates. First, she seeks to underline the extent to which German nationalism in this period was already preoccupied with power politics and territorial expansion. In other words, German nationalism in the 1840s already demonstrated the "aggressive" tendencies, which historians have traditionally associated with the right-wing, official nationalism of the Kaiserreich and its successor states. Here, Geisthoevel is aware that her own findings dovetail with the general trend of contemporary historiography. Second, Geisthoevel seeks to explore the recent historical preoccupations with the interplay between particularism, local identity and nationalism with reference to the Schleswig-Holstein issue.

In an intelligently written opening chapter, Geisthövel argues that these two historiographical debates reflect two fundamentally linked ideas that lay at the core of nineteenth-century German nationalism. These ideas are the *Eigentümlichkeit* and *Macht* referred to in her title and repeatedly discussed in the book itself. In short, Geisthoevel argues that the nineteenth-century understanding of nationhood as a social structure was predicated on the assumption that the interests of the individual and the nation were the same. Importantly, the particularity of the individual within society was perceived as a reflection of the particularity of the nation within the society of nations. Consequently, by defending the integrity of the nation in the world of international power politics the individual was also defending his own freedom and independence.

This approach is promising and the introduction raises a number of important questions about current research into nineteenth-century German nationalism, not least the all-central issue

of why nationhood emerged as the dominant discourse in the period despite the persistence of particularism and the importance of the particular state and the locality as primary frames of reference for the individual. Yet the main body of Geisthoevel's text does not entirely live up to the promise of this stimulating start, primarily because these thought-provoking questions are slightly buried in the mass of interesting quotations and the in-depth analysis that follows. In particular, the tension between particularism and nationalism is not clearly drawn out.

Geisthoevel divides the book into four major sections. In the first, she outlines the emergence of the "Schleswig-Holstein" question within the duchies themselves and the construction of a "Schleswig-Holstein" identity out of two distinct political entities. She notes the ways in which different elements within the duchies sought to instrumentalize the same ideas and arguments to their own ends: supporters of the status quo; Neuholsteiners, who put their German identity first and maintained that the Danes in Northern Schleswig should be entitled to vote to join a Danish nation state if they so desired; Schleswig-Holsteiners, who argued that the duchies were a single historical entity that could not be divided without doing serious damage to the national and racial integrity of their inhabitants, but whose arguments appealed to different groups--the *Buergerium*, the nobility and the Augustenburg claimant to the Schleswig-Holstein throne--for different reasons. All these groups spoke in terms of nationhood, particularity and history, although they attached different meanings to them. By 1844, however, Geisthoevel argues that a consensus had been reached about the impossibility of separating the two duchies and their fundamentally German character. This consensus drew on constitutional and legal arguments put forward by Dahlmann in the early nineteenth century in favor of participatory government for the duchies, but also moved beyond Dahlmann by appealing to the historical law of nationhood and

the logic of self-determination (for Germans if not Danes).

In the next three sections, Geisthoevel explores the reception of the Schleswig-Holstein question in the rest of Germany. The first of these sections (chapter 3) is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of the treatment of the Schleswig-Holstein question in various branches of the German *Öffentlichkeit* (the press, pamphlet literature, public meetings, parliamentary debates, nationalist festivities, petition and subscription campaigns, etc.). This rather tedious groundwork establishes that the Schleswig-Holstein was of relatively little interest to German nationalists before about 1842, but thereafter it emerged as an increasingly pressing concern although, in the final analysis, few German nationalists were willing to prioritize Schleswig-Holstein's independence above other national goals as their response to the truce of Malmö indicated.

The rest of the book considers the implications of this development for the nature of German nationalism and, conversely, what it tells us about the preoccupations of the nationalist movement. Geisthoevel argues that concern over Schleswig-Holstein reflected a more fundamental anxiety about the lost territories of the German peoples and a sense of vulnerability and awareness of Germany's inability to meet new global challenges in a rapidly changing world. The emotions directed towards the duchies projected fears about Germany's western frontier and the territorial ambitions of France and Russia alongside impractical dreams of a German navy as the basis for a new *Weltpolitik* on to the existing dynamic of the Schleswig-Holstein question. More specifically, German nationalist attitudes towards "Germanic" peoples like the neighboring Danes underwent an important shift of emphasis away from similarity and towards enmity and competition. Ultimately, however, the nationalist movement failed to live up to its rhetoric as far as the

Schleswig-Holsteiners were concerned, prompting them to retreat into particularism.

It is unfortunate that Geisthoevel stops here, rather than taking her analysis into the 1850s and 1860s, when the Schleswig-Holstein question reemerged as a central preoccupation of German nationalism. The reader is inevitably left wondering how the Schleswig-Holstein movement of the 1860s, which demonstrated an extraordinary ability to unite opposing wings of the political spectrum, related to these earlier developments. All in all, however, Geisthoevel's work represents a useful contribution to our understanding of the German nationalist movement in this period. Her findings are not, for the most part, entirely unexpected, but she presents them in a sophisticated and thought-provoking way.

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

**Citation:** Abigail Green. Review of Geisthoevel, Alexa. *Eigentuemlichkeit und Macht. Deutscher Nationalismus 1830-1851. Der Fall Schleswig-Holstein*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9600>



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