



**Jost Hermand, Michael Niedermeier.** *Revolutio germanica: Die Sehnsucht nach der "alten Freiheit" der Germanen 1750-1820.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002. 346 S. EUR 50.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-631-39671-1.



**Reviewed by** Marion W. Gray (Department of History, Western Michigan University)

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

## Coming to Terms with German Nationalism

Jost Hermand and Michael Niedermeier have collaborated on an interesting and complex book that can be read in at least three different ways. First, *Revolutio germanica* is a work about Enlightenment principles and early German nationalism, as expressed through literature, music, art, landscape architecture, and garden sculpture in the period 1750-1820. Second, it is an extended essay on the relationship between the ideals of this significantly transitional era and the twentieth-century politics of Germany, especially those of the National Socialist period. Third, the work is a personal essay shaped by the senior author, Jost Hermand, relating to some of his own endeavors to understand the relationship between early nineteenth-century patriotism and National Socialism. These three themes are intertwined through the nine essays of the book. I shall discuss each in turn.

It is widely accepted that modern German beliefs regarding the nation-state and citizenship have roots in the period of the late Enlightenment and the upheavals of the Napoleonic era. Niedermeier and Hermand identify and interpret expressions of such ideals in material culture and the arts. They demonstrate that both before and af-

ter the French Revolution, many intellectuals and artists held a fascination for German antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Niedermeier, in a chapter of ninety-five pages, "Germanen in den Gärten," interprets eighteenth-century gardens "as political landscapes" (p. 21). He analyzes the twenty-five-kilometer-wide garden realm of Dessau-Wärlitz, commissioned by Prince Franz of Anhalt-Dessau (1740-1817) and designed in part by the architect Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorff (1736-1800). The artifacts and the landscape motifs of this extensive garden complex emphasize themes from pre-classical and classical antiquity, from the ancient Nordic past, and from medieval Germany. They portray especially the heroic deeds of leaders such as Armenius (Hermann) who is credited with ending Roman expansion into Germany, and Henry the Lion of Bavaria and Saxony, who expanded German rule into Slavic realms. Niedermeier finds connections between the garden architecture and the works of several Enlightenment authors, one of whom was Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, the subject of a subsequent chapter by Niedermeier. Klopstock, like the

garden sculptors, was fascinated with heroic Germanic antiquities and romanticized Armenius' defeat of the Romans, which, the poet claimed, was a struggle of the Germanic peoples "in defense of their own ancestral faith" (p. 156).

In seven shorter essays, Jost Hermand explores similar themes in the creations of the era's artists, musicians, poets, and dramatists. The "first German national opera," *Gänther von Schwarzburg* (1777) by Anton Klein and Ignaz Holzbauer celebrated the deeds of its hero who embodied a "love of freedom and a love of peace" and possessed a "truly German soul" (p. 166). Ludwig van Beethoven articulated the ideals of the French Revolution in his early music and later celebrated the patriotic struggles against Napoleon. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), the famous landscape artist, prolifically portrayed Pietistic, "Nordic" themes (p. 186) on his canvases and after the Napoleonic victories of 1806 turned to "national" motifs (p. 188). In his sometimes mystical paintings, Friedrich emphasized German oaks, gothic ruins, and broken crosses, all embodying a "national-religious hopefulness" (p. 213). Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), the youngest artist depicted in the book, spoke out for a new cosmopolitanism in which each and every culture enjoyed its own unique qualities. Heine also advocated protection of minorities, especially Poles and Jews. Embittered by the anti-Semitism of the Burschenschaft movement in the 1820s, Heine vehemently rejected "everything German" (p. 272). Nevertheless, Hermand stresses, Heine did not lose "his special fascination for German antiquity and the German Middle Ages" (p. 280). The artists whom Hermand and Niedermeier have studied clearly drew upon a shared fascination for a heroic, mythical Germanic past in expressing hopes for the future. Many also incorporated vague concepts of freedom and emancipation in their work.

Hermand and Niedermeier maintain, however, that there are more than nebulous ideals of citizenship and rights in the artwork, music, and poetry they analyze. They find in the artists and poets a commitment to a set of principles that include democracy, peace, and human freedoms. Niedermeier suggests, for example, that the gardens of Dessau-Wörlitz are associated with "a policy of European peace" and "protection of civil rights" (*Schutz der Bürgerrechte*) (p. 59). The painter Caspar David Friedrich, according to Hermand, was party to a group of patriots who combined anti-Napoleonic sentiments with "a striving for national unity, social justice, and democratic constitutional principles" (*demokratischer Grundordnung*) (p. 199). These ideals, according to

Hermand, hark back to Tacitus who wrote about "Germanic freedoms." Hermand argues that, although many early-modern German authors misunderstood Tacitus' motives of contrasting Germanic traditions with what he viewed as the decadence of Rome, they were inspired to find in his work the "humanitarian concept of a family of nations that spanned the entire world, in which every people was a member with equal rights." The interpreters of Tacitus "were convinced that the German people could attain freedom and equality only when every citizen of this state felt German, or Germanic ... in short when the common 'farmer' and common 'artisan' could identify with their state" (p. 15).

Many historians—I include myself—will find it a challenge to see the connections between Tacitus, the gardens of Wörlitz, and modern concepts of equality. While it is clear that many Enlightenment thinkers were fascinated with notions like freedom, equality, peace, and cosmopolitanism, many scholars will want to see these concepts analyzed in their own context, rather than connected with both antiquity and the twentieth century. Moreover, while the cosmopolitan and egalitarian ideals of a poet like Heine are documented through his written words, it is much more difficult to identify abstract ideals such as citizenship and freedom in heroic Germanic statues, orchestral works, and landscape paintings. In many cases, the evidence is quite indirect. Hermand argues, for example, that Friedrich had "ideological friends" (pp. 198-199), authors who wrote explicitly about rights and freedoms, hence the ideals are evident also in the artist's paintings. Niedermeier relates the sculptures of Dessau-Wörlitz to the novel *Armenius* (1689) by Daniel Casper von Lohenstein in order to substantiate his claims about the presence of notions of peace and citizenship in the gardens. While fascination with a German culture and heritage is evident in all of the artists analyzed here, many of Hermand's and Niedermeier's claims about devotion to freedom, peace, and freedom rest on tenuous evidence.

In what I regard as the second theme of the book, Hermand and Niedermeier argue ardently and consistently that the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century "ideal of the nation" should in no way be associated with "the excessive distortion of the national principle [leading] to the chauvinistic and even fascist [practices] that have been played out in the last 150 years" (p. 1). Indeed, the patriotic values expressed between 1750 and 1820 can be seen as a "justified" nationalism that strove for a "democratically balanced equilibrium between the subjective goals of self-realization and the promotion of

social justice.” These values stand in contrast with that nationalism of a later era that “ruthlessly suppresses the personal [interests of citizens] in favor state power” (p. 4). It would be “completely ahistorical,” argues Niedermeier, “to equate the eager fascination with Germanic roots [demonstrated by] the North German princes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ... or the members of the German Hainbund with the chauvinistic nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 65).

The subject matter of their analysis—ideals of nation, state, and citizenship of the Enlightenment and Napoleonic eras—is of great contemporary interest to historians. In a path-breaking multi-volume set of studies, for example, Reinhart Koselleck, Werner Conze, and Otto Brunner identified the era of which Hermand and Niedermeier write as a *Sattelzeit*, bridging the old-regime estate-based society and a new regime associated with the modern ideals of individualism and the nation state.[1] Jürgen Schlumbohm demonstrated that the concept of “freedom,” used in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern era, assumed its modern meaning in this pivotal, transitional era.[2] Rudolf Vierhaus demonstrated that “patriotism” of the Enlightenment era often had more to do with economic and social ideals—indeed with agrarian reforms—than with establishing a strong state allegiance.[3] Karen Hagemann and Teresa Sanislo investigated the gendered implications of the new ideals of “Germanness” so prevalent in the transitional era.[4] Matthew Lvinger explored, among other topics, the links between the language of egalitarianism and that of elitism in Prussian political culture during the Napoleonic era and beyond.[5] These scholars, like many others who have focused on the political language and culture of Enlightenment and Napoleonic eras, while often placing their work in the historiographical context of the *Sonderweg* debate, were not especially concerned to dissociate the subject matter of their studies from National Socialist ideals and practices. Why were Hermand and Niedermeier preoccupied with this defense?

I believe the answer is revealed best in one of Hermand’s essays: “Sieg der gerechten Sache! Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld’s *Cäcilia Tschudi als Walküre*” (pp. 238-253). The article, written in first person, is the key to the “personal essay” that I referred to as a third theme of the book. It describes and analyzes an 1813 painting of a young woman, Cäcilia Tschudi, who is heroically clad as one of the Valkyrie, the mythical female spirits who brought the souls of slain Germanic warriors to Valhalla. The painting, reproduced in color on the front cover of *Revolutio germanica*, is indeed an

expression of the “heroic” German art of the Napoleonic era, incorporating themes of Germanic antiquity. Hermand relates how he, in 1971, came into possession of the painting from an art dealer who was glad to be rid of it. It had been rejected by patrons who wanted no such base, “German” artwork in their collections. Hermand found, furthermore, that several renowned scholars, including Jan Bialostocky of Warsaw, Walter Grab of Tel Aviv, and George L. Mosse of Madison, Wisconsin, all eschewed interest in the picture as a historical artifact. They saw in it only negative “German,” “Nordic,” and “Teutonic” themes (pp. 240-241) and some tried to dissuade Hermand from displaying or discussing it. He was challenged, nevertheless, to “convince Mosse [and others] that even the wreath of oak leaves, the two spears and the Bronze-age costume were not necessarily indications of a pre-Fascist mentality” (p. 241). He succeeded in this two decades later, when Mosse stated publicly, “I stand corrected” (p. 242).

Not only in the public mind, but also in the world of scholarship—and indeed among researchers of German history and culture—there is a strong tendency to focus the German past through the lens of National Socialism. This is understandable for those who personally experienced Nazism, as did Bialostocky, Grab, and Mosse, as well as Hermand, who was born in Kassel in 1930. It is significant that some younger scholars also see the need to defend the ideas of the *Sattelzeit* from the accusation that they are “protofascist.” Michael Niedermeier was born in 1954, one year before Hermand received his Dr. Phil. at Marburg and is currently Director of the “Goethe *Wörterbuch*” Project at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. *Revolutio germanica* contains not only Hermand’s and Niedermeier’s informative and methodologically interesting explanation of the “patriotism” and cosmopolitanism of 1750-1820, but also their argument that “the words ‘Germanic’ or ‘Teutonic’ had a significantly more innocent ring between 1806 and 1820 than they do today” (p. 245).

Many contemporary scholars of German history and culture would agree with Hermand’s and Niedermeier’s vigorous assertions that “protofascism” is not to be found in the Enlightenment and Napoleonic eras in Germany. Many may also find that by giving this argument such a prominent place in their book, Hermand and Niedermeier distract from the important historical findings of their research. A more productive analytical approach would have been to keep the discussion focused on the historical context of their study. The Enlightenment was a European-wide intellectual phenomenon, and the

French Revolution and Napoleon stimulated early nationalist expressions in every part of the continent, as well as in Britain. Typically, early nineteenth-century “patriots” sought to identify ancient and medieval heroic roots of their respective cultures. German-speaking Europe was by no means unique in this. The fact that, later, some European nation states turned to fascism had more to do with conditions of the twentieth century than with Enlightenment ideals and romantic notions about state, society, and citizenship expressed in the *Sattelzeit*. The contribution of *Revolutio germanica* is its creative approach to identifying such themes in the artistic expressions of sculptors, poets, architects, and composers.

#### Notes

[1]. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972-1997). See Koselleck, “Einleitung,” 1: xv.

[2]. Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Freiheit—die Anfänge der bürgerlichen Emanzipationsbewegung in Deutschland im Spiegel ihres Leitworts (ca. 1760 ca. 1800)* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1975).

[3]. Rudolf Vierhaus, ed., *Deutsche und patriotische gemeinnützige Gesellschaften* (Munich: Kraus, 1980). See Vierhaus, “‘Patriotismus’-Begriff und Realität einer moralischen-politischen Haltung,” pp. 9-29.

[4]. Karen Hagemann, “*Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre*”: *Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preussens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002); Teresa Sanislo, “Models of Manliness and Femininity: The Physical Culture of the Enlightenment and Early National Movement in Germany, 1770-1819,” Ph.D. diss.: University of Michigan, 2001.

[5]. Matthew Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism: The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture, 1806-1848* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Marion W. Gray. Review of Hermand, Jost; Niedermeier, Michael, *Revolutio germanica: Die Sehnsucht nach der “alten Freiheit” der Germanen 1750-1820*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10043>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).