



Brent O. Peterson. *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation.* Kritik: German Literary Theory and Cultural Studies Series. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. vii + 360 pages. \$54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3200-9.



Reviewed by Lora Knight (Department of History, Southern Virginia University)

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Acquiring a Common Past

Nineteenth-century Germans struggled to define a national identity at the same time that history emerged as an academic discipline and the historical novel became the dominant fictional genre. Brent O. Peterson demonstrates the relationship between these phenomena by examining middle-brow historical literature “where ordinary readers garnered a sense of what it meant to be German” (p. 26). His sources include some academic history, popular history and—most centrally—historical fiction. Choosing from a vast array of works, Peterson does a close reading of selected short passages and narrative sequences that he believes illustrate the major themes that went into creating a common German past dominated by Prussian heroes.

In chapter 1, Peterson compares the three types of historical writing in terms of their audience, writers, goals, subject matter, truth claims and what their readers learned through their exposure to these works. Historians based their work on archives, which enhanced their credibility, but limited the size of the truths they could tell. It also made even popular history less interesting to many readers. Claiming an alternate epistemology, fic-

tion could treat its readers to the undocumented personal lives of great men or the effects of great men and events on ordinary persons. Through historical novels, readers learned or re-remembered actual facts about German history. They came to believe certain things that could only be matters of speculation—such as the motivations of historical actors. And they were treated to the authors’ claims as to who and what mattered in German history.

In chapter 2, Peterson analyzes historical novels written between 1815 and 1830 (in the immediate aftermath of the expulsion of Napoleon from the German states) that engaged the national question. Traditional historical sources for accessing the thoughts and experiences of the middle classes—notably memoirs—are thin for this period. Peterson argues that because novels exist to offer imaginary solutions to real dilemmas faced by their characters, they provide unparalleled access to popular discussions of the nation (p. 72). The heroes of these novels are mostly aristocrats with international ties who agonize over multiple and conflicting regional, national and caste identities. In the end, they usually side with family and class over some idea of Germanness. By 1830,

neither the nation, nor the bourgeois hero through whom Germany would be invented had yet arrived.

Agreement on a Prussian-led, small-German national identity remained contested throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. However, the work of debating this identity—at least that done in historical writing—began in earnest after 1848. The heart of Peterson's work is found in chapters three through five. Here he interrogates his sources through the lens of a model provided by Anthony D. Smith. Smith identifies six elements that create typical ethnic myths: a myth of temporal origins; of location and migration; of ancestry; of a heroic age; of decline; and of regeneration.[1] Although he touches on the first three of these myths throughout the book, Peterson concentrates on the last three. Chapter 3 traces how Frederick the Great's era (1712-86) came to represent a heroic age for Germany; chapter 4 is dedicated to Jena (1806) as a symbol of national decline; chapter 5 shows how the "Wars of Liberation" (1813-15) came to be seen as a period of nationalist regeneration.

Nineteenth-century authors agreed on the importance of these figures and events, although their interpretations varied widely over time and depended on the version of the nation they envisioned. Frederick the Great—the French-speaking Prussian monarch—had to be recast as "Old Fritz," an approachable father figure for all Germans. Jena had to be transformed from a Prussian military defeat into "the mythical low point of Germany's moral, political, or social decline" (p. 147) without tarnishing its actors beyond the point that disqualified them from effecting an astonishing regeneration less than a decade later during the Wars of Liberation. This feat depended largely on nationalist authors developing a suitable character for Queen Louisa, faithful wife of the incompetent Frederick William III, under whom the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation ceased to exist in 1806. Her death before the regeneration of 1813-15 allowed her to be cast as a saintly martyr to the national cause. Germany, of course, did not spring into existence

in 1815, nor yet in 1848, but Louisa provided the glue for later authors by supposedly passing on her patriotic virtues to her son, William I, who became the emperor of a united Germany in 1871. Like Frederick the Great, Queen Louisa of Prussia became German after her death. Significantly, both "Fritz" and Louisa also became bourgeois, with modest German tastes and a love for domesticity. Peterson is dealing, of course, with representations. However, I would still have appreciated a bit more information about the "real" Louisa similar to that provided for Frederick.

Chapter 5 treats the Wars of Liberation as a myth of national regeneration. If readers expect swashbuckling tales of military adventure, they will be surprised to learn that battlefield heroics occupied a miniscule amount of space in contemporary novels. In the novels set between 1813 and 1815, the real work of hammering out the meaning of the nation and who could be a German was done in the domestic sphere, as victorious soldiers return to find a mate with whom they could found a properly German family. Women can sometimes be patriotic heroines until marriage, but afterwards they are wives and mothers, not active citizens.

History, Fiction and Germany is a pleasure to read. Smith's paradigm provides Peterson with a satisfying and coherent framework. Peterson's own skills as a writer allow him to range through dozens of generally bad novels and other historical representations to produce a nuanced story, sprinkled with humor and irony. This book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of national identity formation in general, as well as the particular conflicted process as it unfolded in nineteenth-century Germany.

Note

[1]. Anthony D. Smith, "National Identity and Myths of Ethnic Descent," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 7 (1984): pp. 95-130.

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