



Katherine B. Aaslestad. *Place and Politics: Local Identity, Civic Culture and German Nationalism in North Germany during the Revolutionary Era.* Leiden: Brill, 2005. 397 S. \$129.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04228-5.



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War and Occupation in Hamburg

This richly researched study of the transformation Hamburg underwent in the face of revolution, war and occupation is a welcome addition to the English-language literature on regional societies and political culture during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.[1] It can be divided into three (unequal) parts.

The first part, about two-thirds of the book, deals with Hamburg at the end of the eighteenth century, before the French occupation in 1806, and was, one suspects, the most difficult part of the book in terms of research and writing. The accent is on Hamburg's social and cultural identity, on the existence of a civic morality among its elite and the threats to the city's republican values in the face of the economic upheavals brought about by the French wars. The premise is that most of the educated elite were civic-minded and contributed unthinkingly and unselfishly to the welfare of the city-state. Certainly evidence survives of an active social network that helped maintain Hamburg's particular brand of republicanism. This *Patriotismus*, as it was called, this communal spirit (*Gemeingeist*), was practiced through any number of civic associations—the Patriotic Society, founded in

1765, whose purpose was poor relief is an example. The tendency to put the common good rather than individual interests at the forefront—reflected in Hamburgers' rejection of ostentatious wealth as incompatible with republican values—is presented as one of the city's defining characteristics and is central, according to the author, to an understanding of Hamburg's "republican ideals" (p. 77).

Even though Aaslestad points to the tensions that lay under the surface of Hamburg society, she tends to portray the Hamburg polity in idealized terms, as experiencing a golden era about to be spoiled by the impact of the French Revolution. Educated Hamburgers themselves may have felt such sentiments: a debate developed in the press about the nature of their republic (pp. 136-142), brought about by concerns that the French Revolution was having an adverse impact on communal values. To the citizens of Hamburg, the French Revolution represented an individualism considered incompatible with their own brand of republicanism. Indeed, the revolution's increasing radicalism reinforced the belief that Hamburg's moderate political system was the best around, better even than the American model.

The threat from France, initially at least, was therefore considered to be not so much political as social. The revolutionary wars brought about an economic boom in Hamburg that in turn led to an increase in consumer spending on what were once considered luxury items. The types of fashion adopted by the young and wealthy and indeed the money they were now prepared to spend on household items, food, gardens, carriages and country villas all signaled that Hamburgers were moving away from the community towards a more pleasure-seeking individualistic lifestyle. This increase in materialism, this “culture of display,” was indicative of a shift in attitudes, according to contemporaries, away from “public-mindedness” towards frivolous pastimes—card games, banquets, balls—without any “deeper public purpose” (p. 178) that further undermined public duties. Criticisms of frivolous consumption and lifestyles on the part of both sexes were thus made by conservative contemporary observers who believed that dissolute behavior—drinking, gambling, dining late into the night—would distract Hamburgers from their duties and somehow weaken not only the bonds of the family but also those of commerce.

Of course, all of this activity was bad for community spirit, a theme that preoccupied the media of the time. The rise of what contemporaries termed *Egoismus* was seen to be in direct proportion to the decline of *Patriotismus*. Public consumption was thus linked in the conservative contemporary mind to political decline. Were there any voices raised in defense of the emerging consumerism? It appears to have been a rather one-sided affair; the pamphlet literature quoted represents the conservative viewpoint. Nor do we know to what extent this issue was simply a generational one, that is, of the trends and lifestyles of the young being disapproved of by older adults, or to what extent it may have been a conservative reaction to French cultural imperialism, seen as having a deleterious influence on republican values. Aaslestad admits that these types of questions are the “familiar staple of republican discourse” (p. 201), but does not consider them at any length.

The author concludes from all this discussion that a real shift in values was taking place, that there were “tangible consequences of fashionable consumption” (p. 192) on the polity. She points to the neglect of poor relief in the early 1800s as an example of this development. In short, Aaslestad seems to accept the link made by contemporaries between the rise of fashionable lifestyles (materialism, consumerism) and the decline in civic morality. Does she take contemporary views too

much at face value? If a decline in civic identity did occur, it might have been useful to consider other, contributing factors, perhaps within the broader landscape of northern Germany. Conceptions of what it was to be a “lady,” or a “gentleman,” for example, must have been changing (something Aaslestad recognizes), but it would have been helpful to focus more on this issue in the context of attempts by Hamburg patriots to define acceptable “republican” behavior in the late 1790s (pp. 194-202).

All of these debates were, in any event, put on hold until the defeat of the French in Germany and the remarkably rapid revival in trade that took place in post-Napoleonic Hamburg, to the point where, by the early 1820s, some Hamburgers were, once again, beginning to ask questions about the impact of material gains on their society (p. 307). By then, however, any sense of the civic patriotism that dominated the second half of the eighteenth century had been replaced instead by a growing reluctance among the city’s elite to become involved in the city’s social problems. Poor relief and educational programs declined along with the civic societies that once fostered them largely as a result of the French occupation.

Despite vain attempts to maintain a neutral stance (the subject of chapter 5), Hamburg, inevitably one might argue, was occupied by the French in 1806, and remained occupied, with a short respite in 1813, until May 1814. This period is the subject of the second part of the book, chapters six and seven. They are particularly good and bring to light the hardships faced by ordinary Hamburgers, suffering from the economic backlash of the Continental System, who were also being forced to billet and feed for months on end thousands of troops from the Grande Armée (pp. 225-244). This particular burden seems to have fallen heaviest on the middle and lower classes, fueling tensions between the poor and the elite, who often managed to avoid the more onerous burdens placed on the city. In some cases, the poor were obliged to sell off furniture in order to pay for the extra mouths foisted on them (p. 237). Not until the creation of a Billeting Deputation to organize the quartering of foreign troops, two years after the town was occupied, was some sort of system put in place (although we are not told why Hamburg, which seems to have been run so efficiently before the occupation, was now so slow to look after the welfare of its own people [p. 240]).

As for the implementation of the Continental System, the most common reaction seems to have been an upsurge in smuggling. Napoleon reacted, as he did else-

where in Europe, by sending 300 customs agents to Hamburg at the beginning of 1807, but this measure does not seem to have made much of an impact on illicit trade. Instead, the customs agent became the symbol of Napoleonic oppression (p. 232-235). Smuggling was often simply a question of economic survival, but it was never enough to make up for the flow of trade that had preceded the enactment of the Berlin Decrees, despite the hundreds of people making the journey between Altona and Hamburg daily. Hundreds of commercial houses consequently collapsed, while thousands of ships lay idle in port and thousands of people associated in one way or another with maritime trade found themselves unemployed. The interruption of colonial trade had, moreover, a devastating effect on industries like sugar refining.

The French authorities were initially complicit in the smuggling, especially the minister plenipotentiary, Louis-Antoine de Bourrienne, who lined his pockets by allowing trade with Britain to continue, thus completely ignoring the Berlin decrees. It took Napoleon years to figure out what was going on; it was only after he sent Marshal Louis Nicolas Davout to spy on Bourrienne that he received confirmation of the French authorities' corruption. What, one wonders, were Napoleon's police up to? When the corruption became so apparent that Napoleon decided he could not ignore it, his response was to incorporate Hamburg into the Empire.

In 1811, Davout was sent to Hamburg with the express purpose of abolishing the city's administrative structures and replacing them with a new imperial administration staffed by French bureaucrats and headed by a French prefect. In the first six months or so of 1811, hundreds of French administrators descended on the city and began transforming it into an integral part of the French Empire, a process that seems to have been finished by July of that year (p. 246). The French maintained control of the most important functions, but where possible local officials were also used to assist them. Indeed, they were for the most part incorporated into the new French administration, or new officials were enlisted from among the sections of Hamburg society enfranchised by the arrival of the French—Calvinists (the city was Lutheran) and Jews, who could now find employment where previously they had been excluded. Most of those already in place and who stayed seem to have done so for a mixture of personal reasons (to maintain their own living conditions) and what might be called patriotic reasons—to neutralize the influence of the French, out of a sense of loyalty and duty towards the city state, and in an attempt to help their own people (p. 247). From this

picture we get a sense of why some elites collaborated at the local level.

It was not until the initial departure of the French in 1813 that the institutional structures they had put in place collapsed, and that Hamburgers began, once again, to think in terms of *Patriotismus*, still centered on the city-state rather than on a greater German political entity. Two citizen militias—a Hanseatic Legion and a German variant of the French National Guard, the Citizens Militia (*Bürgergarde*)—attracted thousands of volunteers, motivated in part by a newly liberated German press that was able to vent its frustrations against past French injustices. An inevitable confluence between local and national patriotism emerged: Hamburgers recognized that their liberty was dependent upon the freedom of Germany (p. 282). Freedom, however, was the key word—it was not a struggle for national unity—and was a quest that cut across regional, class and religious boundaries to find some sort of German cultural solidarity. This display of *Patriotismus*, however, does not seem to have garnered much support. The Citizens Militia was not taken particularly seriously by Hamburg's citizens (pp. 292-93), and the city's defense seems to have been plagued by corruption (partly Allied), incompetence and lack of determination. The result: the French easily marched back in June 1813, where they stayed until ousted, once again by the Allies, in May 1814.

By that stage, it appears that the damage to the social fabric was irremediable. Gone were the days when merchants, doctors and lawyers gave freely of their time to promote social justice and to help the poor. Civic-mindedness was now replaced with another concept whose principal tenet was "individualism"—an aspect of economic liberalism. Hamburg had been transformed from a city where the community was all important in the 1780s, to a city where laissez-faire individualism had now gained the upper hand.

The third and final part of the book, contained in the epilogue (chapter 8), looks at the role of the Wars of Liberation in German public memory in the nineteenth century.[2] Even though Hamburgers fought in the Wars in order to gain their own independence, the memory of the wars was eventually appropriated by a greater German national consciousness, so that during the hundredth anniversary of the Wars (celebrated in 1913), Hamburg's struggle was portrayed as part of a larger national struggle for the liberation of Germany. Aaslestad traces that shift in time by looking at three anniversaries, from the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1838 of the local experience

of the wars, in which notions of an ideal republican society were celebrated; to the fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 1863, in which the idea of self-liberation was conflated with a shared national perspective on the Wars; to the hundredth anniversary in 1913 (by which time

Hamburg had been fully incorporated into the German Empire), in which the celebrations served to remind “the general population of the importance of German military power in an era fraught with international tensions” (p. 337). It would have been interesting to read something on whether the emphasis on the hardships suffered under French rule during the hundredth anniversary, a celebration that took place one year before the outbreak of the First World War, made any impact on local perceptions of the French, but that would have been beyond the scope of the book. In all of this, the liberation of Hamburg by Russian troops seems to have been conveniently forgotten (p. 341), a phenomenon characteristic of the German historiography of the Wars of Liberation.[3] In short, the city’s history under French rule was gradually incorporated into a larger narrative about Germany’s struggle for liberation and national unity, thus creating a “mythic military past” that distorted history to fit a nationalist agenda.

The conclusion that one can draw from Aaslestad’s study is that French occupation brought nothing of value. Hamburg, like many of its German city and state counterparts, was bled dry and thus welcomed the wars of 1813 as an opportunity to free itself from French oppression, and to regain its independence. Hamburg’s citizens fought the French to preserve their traditions, and not to create a “new national future.” Aaslestad’s work should, however, also be seen as a valuable addition to the historiography of Germany in the nineteenth century. By

focusing on some of the preoccupations of the Hamburg elites—their desires, their concerns, their hopes—one can argue the German middle classes, at least in this region, were engaged in debates about the relationship of the individual to society. In other words, the example of Hamburg suggests that German middle classes were politically engaged in ways that have not perhaps been adequately acknowledged until recently.

Notes

[1]. Other recent regional studies include: Michael Broers, *Napoleonic Imperialism and the Savoyard Monarchy, 1773-1821: State Building in Piedmont* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Gavin Daly, *Inside Napoleonic France: State and Society in Rouen, 1800-1815* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Michael Rowe, *From Reich to State: The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Robert Beachy, *Soul of Commerce: Credit, Property, and Politics in Leipzig, 1750-1840* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Michael Broers and John A. Davis, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions, 1780-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2]. Two recent reassessments of the Wars of Liberation are Karen Hagemann, “*Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre*”: *Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002); Ute Planert, *Der Mythos vom Befreiungskrieg: Frankreichs Kriege und der deutschen Sünden, 1792-1841: Alltag, Wahrnehmung, Deutung* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006).

[3]. Dominic Lieven, “Russia and the Defeat of Napoleon (1812-14),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7 (2006): pp. 283-308.

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