



**Brian E. Vick.** *Defining Germany: The 1848 Frankfurt Parliamentarians and National Identity.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002. x + 283 pp. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00911-0.



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This very useful analysis of pre-unification German nationalism focuses on the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848/9. Basing his arguments on the debates of the parliament itself, on the publications of its members, and on the works of figures such as Kant, Fichte and Hegel who shaped the intellectual climate of the time, Brian Vick dissects attitudes to nationhood in general and German nationhood in particular. This approach proves extremely fruitful. The Frankfurt Parliament was notoriously unrepresentative of the population at large but, as Vick argues, it was very representative of educated political opinion. Most deputies desired German unification of some kind, but within this consensus the political spectrum ranged from unitarists through federalists to reformist particularists. In terms of age, confession and geographical distribution, the range of deputies was even more comprehensive. From this perspective, the Frankfurt Parliamentarians provide an excellent starting point for an analysis of the culture of nationhood amongst Germany's mid-century political elite.

Vick's approach is avowedly that of the intellectual historian, although he draws on more recent sociological and cultural approaches to the problem of nineteenth-century German nationhood. As such, his book provides a welcome up-date of the traditional history-of-ideas approaches to the issue. It is, however, very much a book

for the specialist, which assumes a high degree of knowledge in the reader and leaps straight into the nitty-gritty of nineteenth-century intellectual debate with little contextual explanation. Moreover in terms of focus, Vick pays far more attention to the new categories of analysis he puts forward himself than to "old chestnuts" like the *kleindeutsch/grossdeutsch* debate. This clearly reflects the relative importance Vick attaches to different facets of German nationhood, but, equally, it is unrepresentative both of the debates in the Frankfurt Parliament itself and of the wider historiographical literature. For the specialist, however, it will prove an invaluable addition to existing work on German nationalism.

The book falls into two sections: an account of pre-1848 ideas about nationhood and an account of how these ideas developed during the revolution. Although shorter, the former is, in many ways, the more novel since the *Vormaerz* has inevitably attracted less attention in the historical literature than the revolution itself. From this perspective, Vick's contribution is particularly welcome. It provides us with a context in which to place the developments of 1848 and it enables us to assess how far the events of 1848 did indeed radicalize existing conceptions of nationhood.

In the first section of the book, Vick makes two main arguments. First, he seeks to undermine the traditional

distinction drawn by historians and theorists of nationalism between the “political” understanding of nationhood prevailing in Western Europe and the “cultural” understanding of nationhood that predominated in Central and Eastern Europe. According to this distinction, whereas the former focused on notions of citizenship in defining nationality, the latter focused on ethnic identity and particularly language as qualifications for nationhood. According to Vick, however, this distinction misrepresents the complex way in which Frankfurt parliamentarians combined cultural and political ideas in their conception of nationhood. He demonstrates that whilst Germans undoubtedly did see language and culture as facets of nationality, they also saw political institutions as an equally important expression of this national culture. Similarly, the emphasis placed on free will and the role of self-determination in nationhood undercut racial and biological determinist ideas. From this perspective, the boundaries of the German nation in Central Europe remained very fluid in the minds of the nationalist opposition before 1848. Equally, Vick demonstrates the fundamental interconnection between liberalism and nationalism in this period.

Second, Vick explores the role of the past and conceptions of history in the nationalist imagination. On the one hand, he demonstrates the wide variety of ways in which men from different ends of the political spectrum constructed the German national past. Here, his analysis undercuts the traditional assumption that pro-Prussian and Protestant nationalists idealized the ancient Germans and denigrated the Catholic and imperial High Middle Ages, whilst pro-Austrian and Catholic nationalists idealized the medieval Empire and located German decline in a later period. In reality, the range of historical narratives was more complex than this simplistic dichotomy might suggest. On the other hand, Vick places great emphasis on organicist conceptions of both state and nation as historical actors. Conceiving of the state/nation in this way enabled members of the nationalist opposition to adapt liberal ideas about the individual to the world of history and international relations. Within the context of a view of history as progress through conflict, this parallelism led liberals to privilege above all the autonomy of the state/nation and the idea of national honor.

In the second half of the book, Vick explores the implications of these ideas for the Frankfurt Parliament itself, showing us how they helped to shape the outcome of its debates. He starts out by exploring attitudes towards religious and national minorities, in the first place the

Jews and in the second place non-German speakers. He shows that whilst Frankfurt parliamentarians undoubtedly shared many of the anti-Jewish prejudices of their era, the 1830s and 1840s marked a transition away from a support for gradual emancipation as a stepping stone to assimilation towards acceptance of the arguments for immediate and unconditional emancipation. Most did indeed believe that emancipation would lead to acculturation, but only religious conservatives and extreme anti-Semites insisted on conversion as the only way in which Jews could really become Germans. This acceptance of the place of minority groups within the German nation was also apparent in attitudes towards citizenship rights for non-German speakers: there was a general consensus that such groups were unquestionably entitled to civil and political equality within the German nation. In both cases, the relative toleration of minorities reflected a political rather than a strictly cultural understanding of nationhood. That said, Frankfurt parliamentarians were more ambivalent in their attitude towards minority languages and cultures. They tended to endorse the rights of minority groups to use their own languages within the areas where they predominated, but they did not accept notions of linguistic parity and were absolutely hostile to the idea of a language other than German being spoken in the future national assembly. Ultimately, this reflected an agenda of peaceful germanization. The parliamentarians accepted the rights of these groups to exist but also assumed the superiority of German culture would eventually prevail.

Similar attitudes determined their approach to border disputes in Schleswig, Poznan and greater Austria. To some extent, parliamentarians took a legal and historical view of these issues. Nevertheless, they also showed a willingness to incorporate predominantly German Poznan into the new nation state, despite the lack of such legal-historical ties. Conversely, they did not envisage separation from historically “German” lands such as Bohemia and Moravia, despite the Czech majority here. Vick argues persuasively that attitudes to these issues were determined by the tendency to privilege urban, industrial, educated and middle-class culture, which was seen as predominantly German even in ethnically mixed areas, over rural folk cultures, which were more often non-German. The relatively expansive definition of German boundaries reflected the parliamentarians’ belief in historical progress and Germany’s civilizing mission in Central and Eastern Europe. Such territories might not yet be culturally German through and through, but as modernity spread so would German culture within them.

Although supporters of *grossdeutsch* and *kleindeutsch* solutions to the German question differed in their tactical approach to these questions, Vick maintains that these differences mask a wider consensus about German nationhood. Finally, Vick demonstrates how conceptions of national honor, national autonomy and Germany's historic mission shaped the belligerent foreign policy of the Frankfurt Parliament. His discussion of the parliamentarians' belief in the inevitability of conflict in history and the probability of conflict between supra-national racial blocks in a European context is particularly interesting.

Throughout, Vick is admirably careful in identifying the political, confessional and geographical bias of individual parliamentarians, although this reader did emerge with a sense that he repeatedly cited a smaller group of relatively prominent figures—Dahlmann, Waitz, Stenzel, Beseler, Struve to name but a few. He also offers genuinely new insights on a variety of issues, ranging from the cultural/political definitions of nationhood, through the links between liberalism and nationalism, to the place of minorities in the German national imagination and the role of conceptions of history in dictating nationalist

ideas. Surprisingly, however, Vick fails to connect with recent debates about federal nationalism and the role of the Holy Roman Empire in shaping German ideas of nationhood. Perhaps this is because Vick takes both federal nationalism and the legacy of the Holy Roman Empire for granted. If so then it is a telling example of his failure to contextualize properly. He is admittedly concerned to place the views of parliamentarians in their wider intellectual context, but does not go further than this. In particular, it would have been interesting to see him exploring continuities and connections between Early Modern and Modern attitudes to German nationhood. Overall, however, Vick provides a thought-provoking analysis of the German culture of nationhood in this period. As such, his book meets a real historiographical need.

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