



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866
Heinrich Heine: Excerpts from *The Romantic School* (1836)

Heinrich Heine (1799-1856), the famous poet, critic, and representative of "Young Germany," offers a critique of the Romantics in his book *The Romantic School* (1836). "Young Germany," an anti-establishment literary movement, advocated a political definition of literature, as opposed to the Romantics' emphasis on aesthetics. Writers such as Ludwig Börne, Karl Gutzkow, and Heinrich Laube comprised the group, which fought for freedom of speech, emancipation of the individual, and democracy during the period of the conservative restoration after 1815.

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Political conditions in Germany were still especially favorable for the medieval-Christian movement. "Misery teaches us to pray," runs the proverb, and indeed, never was the misery greater in Germany, hence the nation was never more susceptible to prayer, religion, and Christianity than then. No people retains more devotion for its rulers than the Germans, and it was the pitiful sight of their conquered sovereigns, whom they saw groveling at Napoleon's feet, that distressed the Germans beyond endurance, far more than the sorry state to which the country had been reduced by war and foreign domination. The whole nation resembled those faithful old servants of great families who feel all the humiliations which their gracious masters must endure even more deeply than the latter themselves and who shed in private their most sorrowful tears when, for example, the family silver has to be sold and who even secretly use their pitiful savings so that no middle-class tallow lights will be placed on the master's table instead of aristocratic wax candles, scenes we view with suitable emotion in old plays. The general distress found consolation in religion, and there arose a pietistic resignation to the will of God, from whom alone help was expected. And in fact, against Napoleon no one else *could* help but the good Lord Himself. People could no longer count on the secular forces and had to turn their eyes trustfully toward Heaven.

We would have endured Napoleon with equanimity. But our rulers, while hoping to be liberated from him by God, at the same time indulged in the idea that the collective forces of their peoples might also be of great help. With this intention an attempt was made to arouse public spirit among the Germans, and even the most exalted personages began to talk of German

nationality, of a common German fatherland, of the unification of the Christian, Germanic tribes, of the unity of Germany. We were ordered to be patriotic, and we became patriots, for we do everything our rulers order us to. One must not think of this patriotism, however, as the same emotion which bears this name here in France. A Frenchman's patriotism means that his heart is warmed, and with this warmth it stretches and expands so that his love no longer embraces merely his closest relatives, but all of France, the whole of the civilized world. A German's patriotism means that his heart contracts and shrinks like leather in the cold, and a German then hates everything foreign, no longer wants to become a citizen of the world, a European, but only a provincial German. So now we saw the perfect boorishness which Mr. Jahn developed into a system; there began the mean, coarse, uncultured opposition to the most magnificent and venerable convictions that Germany has produced, namely, to the humanism, to the universal brotherhood of man, to the cosmopolitanism which our great minds, Lessing, Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Jean Paul, which all educated Germans have always believed in.

What happened soon afterward in Germany is all too familiar to you. When God, the snow, and the Cossacks had destroyed Napoleon's best forces, we Germans received the royal command to free ourselves from the foreign yoke, and we flared up in manly indignation at the servitude endured all too long, and we were inspired by the good melodies and bad verse of Körner's songs, and we fought and won our freedom, for we do everything we are ordered to do by our rulers.

The period of preparation for this struggle was naturally the most favorable soil for a school that was hostile to the French spirit and extolled everything characteristically German in art and life. At that time the Romantic School went hand in hand with the aims of the governments and the secret societies, and Mr. A. W. Schlegel conspired against Racine with the same objective as that of Prime Minister Stein when he conspired against Napoleon. The School swam with the current of the time, the current that was flowing back to its source. When at last German patriotism and German nationality were completely victorious, the national-Germanic-Christian-Romantic School, the "neo-German-religious-patriotic art" also triumphed conclusively. Napoleon, the great Classicist, as classic as Alexander and Caesar, fell, and Messers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, the inconsequential Romanticists, just as romantic as Tom Thumb and Puss in Boots, rose up as conquerors.

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But one must also consider the lack of political freedom in Germany. Our would-be wits have to refrain from any sarcasm in regard to actual rulers and thus want to take substitute revenge for this restriction on the theater kings and stage princes. We Germans, who possessed almost no serious political newspapers, were always doubly blessed with a host of esthetic journals containing nothing but worthless fairy tales and theatrical reviews, so that anyone who saw them was almost compelled to think that the whole German nation consisted simply of babbling nursemaids and theater critics. This would have been unfair to us, however. How little such wretched scribbling satisfied us was demonstrated after the July Revolution when it looked as

though a free word could also be uttered in our dear fatherland. Suddenly journals sprang up which reviewed the good or bad acting of real kings, and many of them, who forgot their lines, were booed in their own capitals. Our literary Scheherazades, who used to lull the public, the coarse sultan, to sleep with their little *novelle*, were now forced into silence, and the actors saw with astonishment how empty the orchestra was, no matter how divinely they played, and that even the reserved seat of the formidable town critic very often remained unoccupied. Previously the good stage heroes had always complained that they and only they had to serve as public topic of conversation and that even their domestic virtues were disclosed in the newspapers. How frightened they were when it looked as though there might be no talk about them at all any more!

In point of fact, when the Revolution broke out in Germany, this was the end of the theater and theater criticism, and the alarmed writers of *novelle*, actors, and theater critics feared quite rightly "that art was dying." But our fatherland was successfully saved from this horrible fate by the wisdom and energy of the Frankfurt Diet of the German Confederation. It is to be hoped that no revolution will break out in Germany; we are protected from the guillotine and all the terrors of freedom of the press; even the chambers of deputies, whose competition had done so much harm to the theaters despite concessions granted these long before, are being abolished, and art has been saved. Everything possible is now being done in Germany for art, especially in Prussia. The museums are ablaze with artful delight in color, the orchestras roar, the danseuses leap their loveliest *entrechats*, the public is enchanted with the Arabian Nights of *novelle*, and theater criticism flourishes once more . . .

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In the Middle Ages most people believed that when a building was to be erected, it was necessary to kill some living creature and lay the cornerstone on its blood; in this way the building would stand firm and indestructible. Whether it was the absurd ancient pagan idea that one could win the favor of the gods by blood sacrifices or whether it was a misunderstanding of the Christian doctrine of atonement that produced this notion about the magic power of blood, about healing by blood, about this belief in blood – suffice it to say, the belief was prevalent, and there live on in songs and sagas the gruesome particulars about how to slaughter children or animals in order to strengthen large buildings with their blood. Today mankind is more sensible. We no longer believe in the magic power of blood, either the blood of an aristocrat or a god, and the great masses believe only in money. Does present-day religion consist then in God as money incarnate or money as God incarnate? In a word, people believe only in money; they ascribe magic power only to minted metal, to the Host of silver and gold; money is the beginning and the end of all their works; and when they have a building to erect, they take great pains to see that some coins, a capsule with all kinds of coins, is placed under the cornerstone.

Yes, as in the Middle Ages everything, single buildings as well as the whole complex of state and church buildings, rested on the belief in blood, all our present-day institutions rest on the belief in money, in real money. The former was superstition, but the latter is pure egotism. Reason destroyed the former; feeling will destroy the latter. The foundation of human society will some day be a better one, and all noble hearts of Europe are agonizingly engaged in discovering this new and better basis.

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