



Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

THE CONTOURS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Historians long distinguished this era for bringing forth the military-bureaucratic power-state, the Enlightenment's rationalist philosophy, and the cultural efflorescence of the "age of Goethe." Narratives of "modernization" link these commanding developments to the rise of bourgeois or middle-class society, with an attendant public sphere of liberal and nationalist political opinion, and new energies of the capitalist market economy propelling Germany to the Industrial Revolution's portal.

In the eyes of successive generations of German speakers who lived through it, the age appeared in different guises. Despite the ferocity and political duplicities of preceding religious conflicts, culminating in the disastrous Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, Germany in the later seventeenth and eighteenth century remained an intensely Christian land, in which discovery of the soul's path to salvation far outweighed whatever contributions people unwittingly made to a future, self-styled, and (as it turned out) often self-deceiving "secular modernity."

From the viewpoint of Germany's rulers – the emperors, the hundreds of territorial princes – the preservation of the far-flung Holy Roman Empire as a bulwark of international and domestic peace and as mediator and justiciar among its component principalities meant more, except to a few ambitious dynasts, than the visions of sovereign independence of one or another German state. The "German nation" and "German unity" were concepts meaningful only as they might be embodied in the ancient Empire. "Glory" [*Ruhm*] was a fitting object of a German ruler's striving, but no more so than his subjects' "welfare" [*Wohl*] and "felicity" [*Glückseligkeit*].

As for those, whether high-born or low, who lived from their private property or labor, life's great aim was to evade untimely death from disease or warfare, so as to marry well, bring forth heirs, and manage one's household as independently as was possible in a world structured inescapably by lordship [*Herrschaft*] and the obligations of "service" [*Diensf*] it imposed on upper

and lower classes alike. “Freedoms” [*Freiheiten*] and “rights” [*Rechte*] were historical, hereditary, and often individual or communal, not universal and egalitarian. They shielded and privileged those who could claim them, though without releasing them from subjection to churchly and earthly authority [*Obrigkeit*].

In a largely agrarian society, people’s private fortunes hung on the bounty or meagerness of grain and other harvests. Dearth meant hunger, high food prices, and shrunken purchases of urban manufactures, spreading agrarian crisis into the towns. For landlords, it meant rents in arrears. Meager crop yields could squeeze state tax receipts, churchly tithes, and feudal dues. Repeated harvest failure, though rare in peacetime, spelled starvation and death for the weak. In a world of villages and small towns remote from the few long-distance trade routes, salvation through agricultural imports at affordable prices was usually an illusory hope.

Before the late eighteenth century few people, even of the educated and propertied classes, aimed – or dared – to project their minds beyond the categories of Christian orthodoxy, folk mythology, and the romances of popular literature. Identities were mostly intensely local, tied to religion, social rank, occupation, sex and gender, kinship and age group. That one, by language or custom, was “German” entailed few, if any, consequences, especially in view of marked differences – spurring rivalries and reciprocal deprecation – among religious confessions, regional dialects, habits of dress, and social customs. Political loyalties were dynastic, not ethnic. Love of country was love of one’s narrow historical-geographical homeland [*Heimat*], amplified sometimes by patriotic enthusiasm for one’s ruling dynasty or authority.

Thoughts of cumulative mastery of nature through empiricist and experimental science had hardly entranced even savants’ minds, which gravitated instead to philosophies founded on logical necessity. For most people, ancient usage and authority – such as that of the indestructible Aristotle – were the surest guides. Mysteries were better plumbed by clergymen or adepts of folk magic. Fate, though inscrutable, was often thought appeasable. Without God’s grace [*Gnade*], body and soul would disappear into the abyss.

Such, in brief, was life deep into the eighteenth century. It was a multifarious German world, but the aspirations and values that ruled it were in no way self-consciously national. It was not a peculiarity of the Germans that, when the age of nationalism began to dawn after 1789, there was no easy answer to the question that the revolutionary musician Richard Wagner posed in

his 1865 essay, "What is German?" For Wagner, as for most modern nationalists throughout the world, national identity proved to be a self-exalting version of national history, bathed in universal significance and invested with a redemptive meaning that, in the pre-modern world, had belonged to religion alone.

THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE OF THE GERMAN NATION

The Thirty Years War witnessed the culminatory struggle between the Catholic and centralization-minded emperors, long successively elected from the Austrian ruling house of Habsburg, and the secular territorial princes, mainly Lutheran Protestants but including Calvinists and certain Catholics (as in Bavaria) jealous of their dynastic independence. The princes sought to protect their "liberty" [*Libertät*] from imperial encroachments and promote the devolution of governmental power within the Empire into their hands. This process had been occurring for centuries, but after the Protestant Reformation, the Austrian emperors attempted to reverse it in the name of Catholic orthodoxy and their own great-power interests, tied also to those of Spain, where a collateral Habsburg lineage reigned. In the Thirty Years War, Swedish and French armed intervention on behalf of the German territorial princes defeated the Austrian emperors' nearly-attained project, whose realization would have changed the face of German and European history.

The 1648 Peace of Westphalia restructured the institutions of the Empire to definitively block unilateral imperial power. The emperors could attain no innovations without the Imperial Diet or Reichstag's consent. As of 1792, after various intervening changes, this body seated deputies of eight electoral principalities (Council of Electors), sixty-three deputies representing two hundred and ninety-nine other secular principalities (Secular Bench), thirty-five delegates from the Empire's self-governing ecclesiastical territories (Ecclesiastical Bench), and fifty-one from the self-governing imperial cities (Council of Cities). New legislation still required majorities in each of these three categories. When innovations touched on religion, the deputies regrouped as representatives of one of the above-mentioned three principal Christian confessions whose practice the war's outcome had guaranteed (within some limits of toleration) in Germany.

Before the Empire's demise in 1806, the Reichstag – meeting continually since 1663 on the Danube's banks in the mixed Protestant-Catholic imperial city of Regensburg – promulgated

exceedingly few important new laws. But the emperors retained an influential function in presiding over the organs of imperial justice, to which the hundreds of minor territorial rulers and the nearly 1,500 imperial knights – landed nobility owing allegiance directly to the emperors alone – frequently turned for resolution of internal and external conflicts. The stronger German states (notably Bavaria, Prussia, and Saxony) resisted subordination to imperial jurisdiction.

In the late seventeenth century, in face of French aggression on the Empire's western borders, the threatened German lands sought to strengthen imperial military functions, organized since the year 1500 in "circles" [*Kreise*] encompassing multiple principalities. But the Austrian emperors now viewed such developments as curbs on their own military power, which was anchored in their hereditary lands, not in the Empire at large. Though armed enforcement within the Empire of imperial law [*Reichsexekution*] was militarily allowable, it required congruence between Habsburg and territorial rulers' interests that, so far as politically weighty states were concerned, never materialized. The Empire could not prevent crippling foreign invasions, notably by the French under Louis XIV (1661-1715) and again in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon (1789-1815). Nor did it forestall internal war, especially the long and bloody confrontation between Prussia and Austria in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the Seven Years War (1756-1763).

The Holy Roman Empire could not develop into a modern state. It was rather a multi-polar, decentralized national confederation, housing within itself at first embryonic, but then increasingly authentic German states alongside a mass of ever more militarily defenseless lordships and authority-structures (chiefly the imperial cities and knights, and the Catholic ecclesiastical lands). These coexisted symbiotically, so to speak, with the Empire, and in the years 1803-1806 fell forever, together with it, under Napoleon's hammer blows. The Empire lived out its thousand-year history thanks to the post-1648 consensus of the European Great Powers that fragmentation of rule in German central Europe served their interests. But the European empire of Napoleon to which the French Revolution gave birth, short-lived though it was, rendered this perspective antiquated (without solving the resultant "German question").

Many modern German nationalists condemned the Empire for failing to centralize power and advance on the path toward national unity. Post-1945 historiography has taken a more indulgent view, highlighting the benignity of life under the myriad princelings, and sometimes imagining the Empire as a precursor to the present-day European Union, which is also an assemblage of

independent though confederated states. In the Holy Roman Empire, over three hundred rulers' courts gave rise to an equal number of princely residences, with orchestras, theaters, libraries, museums, aristocratic colleges and learned academies. Such conditions paid a cultural dividend – evident still today in Germany's rich musical and theatrical life – and also gratifyingly employed the intelligentsia. In the late eighteenth century, an unaccustomed imperial patriotism [*Reichspatriotismus*] flowed from some influential publicists' pens. They extolled a suddenly improved administration of imperial justice and the Empire's role in preserving German "liberties" against the rise, in one or another territorial principality, of "tyrannical" state power. Yet, simultaneously, absolutist Prussia's powerful king Frederick II ("the Great") basked in popularity among other (or even the same) Enlightenment literati.

Oppression of subjects, where it occurred, was no more tolerable under an urban republic, an archbishop, or a quasi-sovereign nobleman than under one of the handful of strong German states. Charges of "despotism" were typically rhetorical blows, even if class and political injustice was as familiar in Germany as in France or Britain. Yet appeal to courts of law was open to all Germans everywhere, including peasant serfs. The Empire afforded room to multi-confessional life in a Europe that otherwise mostly upheld single Christian religious establishments. It lived by a conservatism that benefited those with a stake in the status quo. It did not favor military aggression. It sustained in the German imagination a certain sense of national identity and dignity, though exceedingly far removed from most ordinary people's lives.

POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE GERMAN TERRITORIAL PRINCIPALITY: THE "ESTATES POLITY"

The defeat and subsequent hobbling of the Austrian Habsburgs' imperial powers caused responsibility for the fulfillment of state functions to devolve onto the shoulders, often frail, of Germany's hundreds of territorial princes. It was they, not the emperors, who were obliged to oversee and maintain a system of local law courts and accompanying police institutions; to command militias and armies, whether miniature or great; and to cooperate with the Christian churches in supplying spiritual, charitable, and educational blessings.

These tasks they took in hand, not autocratically, but in cooperation with the communal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical bodies which had evolved in the thousand years and more

following the fifth-century fall of the Western Roman Empire: oligarchical, though often elected, councils and magistracies in villages and towns; regional assemblies seating landed nobility, high churchmen, prosperous burghers and, in a few regions, self-sufficient village farmers. These were the “estates of the realm” [*Stände*].

Social organization by estates was pervasive. The principalities and towns seated in the Imperial Diet were, in relation to the emperor’s power, Reich-level estates, while the thousand-plus imperial knights could boast of being “estates lords” [*Standesherrn*]. Correspondingly, within the myriad territorial principalities, rulers co-governed in partnership with the estates of their own lands, whether, in such large polities as Austria and Prussia, on a provincial level or, in smaller territories, in a single central assembly [*Landstände*]. In Protestant principalities, the estates typically shrank to represent landed nobility and chief towns only. In Catholic ecclesiastical principalities, the worldly nobles seated in the power-sharing cathedral chapters offered a variation on the estates concept, while the church hierarchs recognized their subject towns’ corporate liberties. In Catholic ruled secular principalities, high churchmen survived as one of the three customary estates.

Historians often conceive the early modern territorial principality as an “estates polity” [*Ständestaat*], because rulers were bound to consult the estates in matters of new legislation. Tax levies usually gained passage on short terms requiring renewal, not always conceded. In many cases, estates proved stronger than princes, wresting control through their executive committees and their influence on princely officials of domestic and foreign policy, so that a few German principalities – the Baltic-coast duchy of Mecklenburg is a good example – displayed into the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century an oligarchical parliamentarism with a dependent or figurehead dynast. Yet, so long as no insubordinate or revolutionary movements arose from below seeking the abolition of estates-bound privilege and the common people’s enfranchisement, the German *Ständestaat* embodied a workable political constitution, comparable to many elsewhere in Europe (as in the French and Spanish provinces, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Hungary, and Poland).

All the Holy Roman Empire’s ecclesiastical principalities, and nearly all its many secular principalities and urban republics, were estates polities of one kind or another. Yet it is common to envision the 1648-1789 period as the “age of absolutism,” witnessing the rise of centralized military-bureaucratic states ruled by secular princes – the favored but rarely attained title was

kingly – independent of the historic estates. Doubtless this view reflects the ascent, spectacular even in its own time, of the Kingdom of Prussia, which succeeded in the nineteenth century in crafting, through Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's diplomacy and the Prussian army's sinews, a single German national state, the Empire [*Reich*] of 1871, into which all other surviving German principalities entered under Prussian dominance. Imperial Austria, which also had trodden the absolutist path, suffered battlefield defeat in 1866 at Prussian hands, and as the lone still surviving German-ruled state outside the Bismarckian boundaries, followed a separate path from 1867 until its fall in 1918.

The state that gradually emerged as the Kingdom of Prussia, under the Hohenzollern dynasty, was an archipelago of provinces stretching across north and central Germany from the lower Rhine to East Prussia on Russia's border. Its political capital was Berlin, in the province of Brandenburg. The Hohenzollerns were Calvinists, but most of their subjects were Lutherans. Eventually, Prussia also included a great many Catholics and, in the absolutist era, large numbers of Jews congregated there, making it home to Germany's largest Jewish population. Prussia was both multi-confessional and, with its French Huguenot, Jewish, Polish and other Slavic populations, multi-ethnic.

The Hohenzollerns sought to strengthen the defenses of their far-flung lands, which the Thirty Years War had widely set aflame, by following Spanish and French precedent in raising a standing army. This project they forced on the unwilling and war-battered nobility-led estates, which, under pressure, yielded their consent to permanent direct taxation of commoners and to an indirect tax whose bite was also felt by the landed gentry. Alongside a growing army, swelling tax revenues funded a new princely bureaucracy. It wrote its own administrative law, often overriding an older common law which the remnants of the Brandenburg-Prussian estates, reduced to sub-provincial assemblies and some executive committees in Berlin, feebly sought to uphold.

The Hohenzollern rulers (entitled Kings of Prussia after 1701) harnessed numerous refugee French Calvinist (Huguenot) nobles and burghers to their state-building project as administrators and army officers. To advance their mercantilist, state-guided program of repopulation and economic development, they made use of the newly founded and wealthy, but politically defenseless, Jewish community of financiers and entrepreneurs. They established a new university and, in general, reorganized higher education to train clergymen and officials – a

state-tied intelligentsia – to fulfill their offices in a spirit combining Pietist Protestantism, Baroque-age Neo-Stoicism and, especially after 1740, a brand of European Enlightenment thought viewing rationalist-minded, reform-driven bureaucratic monarchy as the preferred engine of social “felicity” and “perfection.”

After a generation or two, if not immediately, the Prussian nobility and burgher elites saw their interests advanced by Prussian “absolutism.” The landed gentry became, arguably, Europe’s outstanding service nobility, dominating the Prussian army officer corps and occupying numerous administrative offices as well. The Prussian state’s many investments in economic development (notably to supply its army) drew the commercial-manufacturing bourgeoisie into cooperation with the state. The educated middle class lived largely from public-sector employment, while many commoners prospered in agriculture as leaseholders of state domain lands and as tenant-farmers, bailiffs, or justiciars on the nobility’s estates. In these ways, the Prussian pattern tied the propertied and educated elites together in new, state-generated configurations, leaving no powerful oppositional interests on the outside.

During the long reign of Frederick II, Prussia fought dramatic, triumphant wars against Austria (and her changing European allies) with the objective, successfully achieved, of conquering and holding the large and rich Austrian province of Silesia. This prize’s acquisition raised Prussia to rivalrous equality with Austria as arbiter of Germany’s fate, and as the newest of the (now) five European Great Powers. Frederick’s wars crystallized a Prussian identity and patriotism that penetrated the ranks of the common people and solidified the bond between state and society. His successes gave rise to a Prussian mystique that won much support across Germany, especially in Protestant lands whose own princely regimes appeared undynamic and self-serving, unenlightened or unprogressive, inglorious and – an idea that began to arise after 1763 – indifferent to “Germany.” In fact, Prussia, like other power-states, regularly put its own interests (its *raison d’état*) first, as its participation in the Machiavellian partitions of Poland (1772-95) and other self-aggrandizing policies during the French Revolution and Napoleonic period made clear.

Nor should Prussia’s success in building a militarized power-state be exaggerated. Napoleon’s France dealt it a crushing battlefield defeat in 1806 and then imposed territorial, military, and economic losses that would have been crippling had Napoleon’s downfall in 1812-15 not reversed them. Yet compared with other German states, Prussia exhibited decisive strength in

the cohesion of its elites, and in the marshaling of its political and economic resources. The Electorate of Saxony possessed considerable economic strength in its mining and other industrial enterprises, and in the profitable east-west commerce of Leipzig. But its rulers' acquisition of the Polish crown in the years 1733-63 worked against absolutist state-building at home, while its later alliance with Napoleon exposed Saxony to severe territorial losses, to Prussia's advantage, in 1815.

Similarly, the rulers of Electoral Hanover, in gaining the English throne in 1714, missed an opportunity to forge a stronger German state. Bavaria, long a powerful south German principality, faced in the eighteenth century the obstacles of relative urban-industrial decline, a small-scale noble class, and a rich and conservative Catholic church. Its bitter rivalry with Austria, which lured it repeatedly into French alliances, exacted heavy military losses, which were compounded by peasant revolts. Though Bavaria gained territory in the late eighteenth century, it did not bristle with arms. In Protestant Württemberg, the nobility, as imperial knights, stood directly under the emperor, leaving the land to be ruled through a burgher-dominated estates-parliament, which sought jealously to block princely power-aggrandizement.

The richest, most prestigious, and long most powerful component of the Empire was the far-flung complex of lands comprising the hereditary possessions of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. These were the territories the Habsburgs held by their own dynastic right – the “power-base of their house” [*Hausmacht*]. They possessed them independent of their status as German emperors, which they enjoyed through election by the Empire's seven (later, eight) electoral princes, who could replace them, when the imperial throne fell vacant, with a representative of another dynasty. This happened briefly (and, since the Habsburgs' fifteenth-century accession to the emperor's throne, uniquely) in 1740-45, when Charles VII of the Bavarian ruling house held the imperial office, though without lasting advantage to his lineage.

The Habsburgs' German lands included Austria and scattered holdings in southwest Germany. They ruled as hereditary kings in adjoining Bohemia, a rich land with a Czech-speaking majority, but also with a powerful German-speaking minority entrenched in the landlordly, churchly, courtly-administrative, and urban upper classes. Their powers as kings of the vast and multi-national kingdom of Hungary, downstream on the Danube from Austria, they could only hope to exercise profitably once the Ottoman Turkish occupation of the greater part of that land ended, in 1699, through the Austrian army's triumph over its long and bitterly fought Muslim foe.

In the eighteenth century, Austria gained possession of the southern Netherlands and, in Italy, of Lombardy and Venetia, including Dalmatia on the eastern Adriatic coast. As a cynical participant, alongside Prussia and Russia, in the partitions of Poland, Austria acquired the large province of Galicia, inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews. Austria also annexed the Romanian-Ukrainian province of Bukovina. Against these gains was the aforementioned painful loss of Silesia, once part of the Bohemian crown. Habsburg policy was rebuffed in its efforts in 1777 to trade the southern Netherlands for Bavaria, where the ruling dynasty had died out.

Austria's strategy for ruling its highly disparate lands was, firstly, to sustain, or reimpose, Catholic religious orthodoxy, aided by the educational and cultural policies of the clergy, especially the Jesuit order. The chief aim was to mold the mentality and thus secure the loyalty of the local aristocracies. Secondly, the Habsburgs relied on co-governance of their various lands together with the provincial elites: landed nobility, high churchmen, and burgher oligarchs. This approach entailed acceptance of the continued functioning of provincial parliaments or estates, along with their semi-autonomous executive committees. Thirdly, the Habsburgs relied on their military power which, concentrated in one of Europe's great armies, had won widely acclaimed glory in the Turkish wars.

Prior to its battlefield duel with Prussia in the mid-eighteenth century, Austria did not emulate its Protestant rival in ratcheting up permanent taxation and building the military-bureaucratic infrastructure of the absolutist state. It seemed safe to assume that Austria's population, several times larger than Prussia's, assured it soldierly primacy, among other advantages. But defeat at the hand of Frederick the Great led the Habsburg rulers, Maria Theresa and her sons Joseph II and Leopold II, to pursue absolutist-style bureaucratic centralization, fiscal escalation, army expansion, and state-driven economic growth. The logic of state-strengthening reform eventually called for the confiscation of certain churchly incomes to the state's advantage, the introduction of religious toleration to promote Enlightenment culture and the spread of entrepreneurial sub-cultures of Protestants and Jews, the abolition of juridical serfdom, and the limitation of feudal rents owed to landlords by subject villagers.

Especially under Joseph II, Austrian "enlightened absolutism" acquired a state-centered radicalism that alarmed and alienated the powerful high aristocracy and church authorities. In both noble-dominated Hungarian political life and in the more bourgeois southern Netherlands, it

ignited nationally-hued opposition to what seemed a ruthless, Germanizing bureaucratic juggernaut. With the French Revolution's outbreak in 1789, the absolutist reform program in Vienna became unsustainable, and after 1792 a regime commenced (lasting to 1835 and beyond) that embraced a conservative program of "throne, aristocracy, and altar."

Absolutism, it turned out, was a suit of armor into which the far-flung Austrian lands and the noble and churchly elites dominating them could not be tolerably fitted. It was only in the narrow Austrian-German and neighboring Bohemian heartland that the Habsburgs achieved a centralized and fiscally remunerative military-bureaucratic transformation. This was not enough to balance Prussia's gains or to offset the cost of ruling in Austria's many other provinces, where there was growing danger that power-aggrandizing state innovation might trigger nationalist resistance. The lesson soon drawn by Austria's long-standing principal executive official, Clemens von Metternich (in office 1809-48), was that Austrian security lay in elite cohesion on conservative principles and in unremitting opposition, spearheaded by police repression, to potentially revolutionary liberalism, democracy, and nationalism. The era of absolutism passed without benefiting Austria as it had Prussia.

THE SOCIAL ORDER

In the 1648-1815 era, sometimes expansively conceived as "the long eighteenth century," pre-industrial society in Germany reached its fullest flowering, while it also sank the roots of the industrialism that would later overshadow it. Rural life attained its peak of complexity, displaying a populous landscape of villages, manorial seats and hamlets serving them, market towns, pastoral and forest enterprises, and the many rural industries, notably milling, that depended on water power and wind. Eighty or ninety percent of the German population lived in such settings. Among town dwellers, more lived in medium-sized market and administrative centers numbering a few thousand or tens of thousands of inhabitants than in big cities, such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig, Munich, and Vienna, whose populations only slowly rose toward or beyond one hundred thousand souls.

Village farmers (*Bauern* or "peasants") were either fullholders with lands large enough to sustain their families from mixed cereal-livestock agriculture alone (on average soils, twenty to forty acres would have barely sufficed, and many peasant farms were much bigger), or they were

halfholders or smallholders, living partly from cultivating their fields and partly from wage-labor for others, sometimes including seasonal cottage industry, notably spinning and weaving, but also simple woodworking and metal crafts. Virtually all landed villagers were legal subjects of one or another old-established lordship [*Herrschaft*]: seigneurial power exercised by the landed nobility or, in the case of villages bowing to the Catholic Church or a territorial ruler, by sub-officials or tenant-farmers leasing ecclesiastical or princely estates. Lordship entailed responsibility for maintaining local courts and police services (including insalubrious but sometimes escapable jails), cooperating in upholding religious life and associated charitable works, and in helping collect taxes and conscript soldiers.

Subject villagers typically held their lands in hereditary tenure, whether *de facto* or *de jure*. Often, but not always, they were free to sell their holdings among themselves, though rural culture greatly prized undiminished inheritance across the generations. Among commoners subject to seigneurial lordship, payment of rent – historians sometimes call it “feudal rent” – was universal. Such obligation might be met in natural payments (especially in grain), in cash, or in labor-services (for example, minimally, a few days *yearly* of work on seigneurial land or, maximally, three days *weekly* or more of such labor, employing – in the case of levies on largeholding farmers – two farmhands and a team of horses).

Labor services loomed large in peasant rent wherever the seigneurial lords maintained large manor-farms of their own, producing crops for near or distant markets. Such conditions prevailed especially in northern and eastern (east-Elbian) Germany, most significantly in the Kingdom of Prussia, whose landed nobility figure in the historical literature as “the Junkers” (a medieval word for young noblemen [*junger Herr*]). The Junkers’ large estates often profitably shipped their grain surpluses from river and Baltic ports to Germany’s burgeoning cities or western Europe. Their subject villagers rendered heavy labor services, and were, in a few regions, tied to their natal villages as serfs [*Leibeigene*].

In western and southern Germany, lordship rarely entailed large-estate enterprise on the east-Elbian model. Seigneurial authorities generally confined themselves to levying cash or natural rents on subject villagers, whose occasional servile legal status justified additional extractions, particularly death-duties. Only along the North Sea coast did a freeholding German peasantry, independent of seigneurialism, exist in significant and compact numbers.

Crucial to the landed villagers were less the facts of lordship and legal subjection than the size and productivity of their landholdings, and the combined bite of rent, taxes, and – not only in Catholic regions – tithes. Subjection and serfdom might hold farmers against their will, but more often the villagers' aim was to occupy desirable farms in their native regions and live well, by their own standards, from them. In western and southern Germany, the impediment to this was population growth and the fragmentation of peasant farms through partible inheritance (that is, the division of farms among heirs). Here, the number of marginal smallholdings proliferated over time, while numerous landless householders and renters dependent on wage-labor and seasonal cottage industry emerged.

In east-Elbian Germany, the large-estate system – a form of “commercialized manorialism” – depended on fullholding peasants and their horsepower for its labor needs. Consequently, while a long-term expansion of smallholders and cottagers occurred here as well, the core of the numerous large peasant farms remained intact. For their possessors, the great challenge was to minimize the burden of feudal rent, and especially weekly labor services. These became the source of interminable conflict, both in the fields, the seigneurial courts, and the royal appeals courts.

Farming families' well-being depended less on legal status than on material assets, especially in land, and on the rents they paid. Peasant prosperity displayed itself in diet, clothing, dowries and marriage portions bestowed by parents on children marrying away from the farm, and in provisions for the retirement of elders. A solid standard of farmstead living might just as well be encountered in East Prussia or Brandenburg as in Bavaria or the Rhineland. The Protestant freeholders of the North Sea coast, immune to feudal rent and tithes, collectively fared best of all (though their numbers were not great).

Virtually every village possessed its poverty-prone, land-poor or landless fringe population, whose presence grew, especially as the population mushroomed after 1763. For if recovery from the losses of the Thirty Years War lingered into the 1720s, a generation or two later demographic pressure began building, especially in regions with partible inheritance. Though pre-modern statistics must be compiled from disparate sources, and while the extent of losses in the great seventeenth-century war is controversial, the following approximations of the Holy Roman Empire's population (mainly German, but not including German communities to the east of the Empire's borders, nor excluding Czech speakers in Austria's Bohemian-Moravian lands)

reflect wide consensus: 1618 – 21 million; 1650 – 16 million; 1700 – 21 million; 1750 – 23 million; 1800 – 31 million. By 1815, and in some regions well before then, self-sufficient farming families constituted, on average, only a minority of the village population (perhaps one-third, more or less). Alongside them, the marginal land-tillers and landless villagers would have ranked, roughly, as equally large groups.

The German nobility [*Adel*] embraced both rich and proud magnates and homespun country squires. The dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire after 1803 reduced many previously sovereign rulers of miniscule principalities, along with the multitudinous imperial knights, to specially privileged noble subjects of the thirty-six territorial German states which, together with three urban republics, survived on the post-1815 European map. Apart from these politically unhorsed aristocrats, each territorial principality had possessed for centuries a noble estate assembled from its own landed gentry, often descendants of medieval knights. They were customarily bound by kinship to a military and bureaucratic service nobility, whose ranks swelled over time by the addition of ennobled officials and other princely favorites.

In principle, noble families possessed property in land. Most noble lineages (allied families sharing a common ancestral name) held portfolios of palaces and manor-houses, landed estates with forest and hunting reserves, and incomes from their tenants' and subject villagers' feudal dues. But numerous individual nobles banked no incomes from agricultural sales or peasant rents, living instead from salaries, investments, and – sometimes – princely sinecures. In Catholic lands, unmarried nobles held most high church appointments, endowed with ample incomes. In ecclesiastical principalities, favored families among the secular nobility enjoyed remunerative and hereditary Church patronage.

It befitted a nobleman to deal in wholesale trade of his landed estate's agrarian products, including beer and distilled liquor (schnapps) made from seigneurial cereals. He might also have his alcoholic drinks sold at an inn or a tavern under his lordship, but if he descended into retail trade or urban manufacture he would likely be obliged to forfeit his noble title and the privileges it carried. These encompassed, most prominently, shelter from direct taxation, on the theory that nobles existed to share with the ruling princes the exercise of rule and lordship. The noble seigneur not only wielded local juridical and police powers, requiring him to employ and pay the officials who enforced them. Above all, he or others from his family, notably his sons, stood under the obligation to serve the prince on the battlefield and at court, while his daughters too

might be summoned to wait upon their ruling mistresses at the princely residences. During their apprenticeship in these roles, the nobility paid much or all of their own way. For men in military or courtly service, only promotion to higher rank began to yield salaried dividends and other perquisites, allowing them also to marry.

From the late seventeenth to early nineteenth century, the service nobility's numbers soared on the wings of the ascending military-bureaucratic "absolutist" state. Though market forces and state-funded land reclamation programs enlarged the number of noble-owned large estates, the landed nobility as a class grew only slowly. Few among them were rich enough to measure themselves against the great aristocrats of England, France, Spain, Hungary, Poland, and Russia. Some dozens of such – as they were known – magnate families bejeweled the Habsburg monarchy, but elsewhere most German landed nobles led prosperous or rich but not opulent lives, privileged yet also usually professionally engaged. Many died in battle, or at any rate in uniform. On the eve of the 1789 French Revolution, the number of nobles living in straitened circumstances – bereft of land and good salaries, sunk in debt, sometimes on the run and at daggers drawn with the law, sometimes behind bars – was not inconsiderable.

The German burgher class [*Bürgertum*] comprised wealthy merchants, often engaged in wholesale or long-distance trade. More numerous were master artisans or handicraftsmen, who were married, workshop-owning employers of journeymen and apprentice workers. The artisan trades, whose numbers in the bigger cities might exceed one hundred, were organized in craft-specific guilds – for example, carpenters or shoemakers. These guilds wielded powers, granted by ruling princes or urban governments, of regulating the number of masters in a given town – for the artisan trades were mostly urban – so as to enable them all to earn a living deemed socially appropriate through the service of a market monopolistically closed to "foreign" artisans, that is, from other towns. Likewise the guilds imposed standards of production (including allowable technology), set prices, and regulated the pay in cash and room and board that masters owed their unmarried workers (though many journeymen lived independently in rented quarters).

Like merchants, master guildsmen voted in town government, and might serve as mayors or aldermen. Important, too, among the burghers, though not so numerous, were the educated professionals: lawyers and judges, medical doctors, town officials, learned schoolmasters and, especially in Protestant lands, the married, university-trained, often scholarly or literarily

engaged clergy. The rise of absolutism swelled the ranks of bourgeois state servants, many of them graduates of newly founded or expanded universities specializing in the “administrative science” [*Kameralwissenschaft*] that boomed in eighteenth-century Germany. It offered training in protectionism-oriented, bullion-hoarding “mercantilist” economics. This doctrine favored state activism in founding monopolistic joint ventures of government and private entrepreneurs (the latter sometimes including so-called “court Jews” [*Hofjuden*]) to develop military provisioning and manufacture armaments and uniforms.

By the late eighteenth century, the growth of the state and the private market economy had raised to prominence both a “bourgeoisie of property” [*Besitzbürgertum*] and a “bourgeoisie of education” [*Bildungsbürgertum*]. They lived more in symbiosis than antagonism with the absolutist state and nobility, both of which depended in business, legal, and also cultural affairs on bourgeois talent and often paid well for it. But “feudal privilege” was increasingly a red flag in burgher eyes, especially when it entailed aristocratic monopolies on ownership of large landed properties (seigneurial lordships) and on high positions in public-sector employment, including the diplomatic and army officer corps.

The military defeats and other humiliations that German territorial rulers and their noble servitors suffered at French hands after 1792, and especially after 1799 in Napoleon’s day, encouraged middle-class critics to raise their voices. Drawing inspiration from the philosophies of liberalism and nationalism, they began to demand equality before the law, the “career open to talent,” constitutional government, an end to princely press censorship, intellectual and academic freedom, and the establishment of a united Germany, if only through a federation of existing states.

Most townspeople could not claim the rights of citizen-burghers, but rather were town subjects without political voice. Many of these were journeymen artisans, typically young adult skilled crafts workers – unmarried, literate, and not averse to wildcat strikes and other tumults. Numerous, too, were servants in burgher households, including boy apprentices living in their artisan masters’ households. Petty merchants, transport workers, and various salaried employees figured as well, while on the margins hovered the indigent poor, including widowed parents with children, alongside the disgraced, the turbulent, and the lawless. Journeymen artisans, heirs to old traditions of insubordination, would eventually form a pioneering phalanx within the nineteenth-century labor movement. In town and village alike, charitable relief for the

“deserving poor” depended principally on provisioning by secular authorities in the recipients’ native birthplace, though the Protestant churches also shepherded the indigent and needy. In Catholic lands, churchly ministrations and individual almsgiving loomed larger still.

Social mobility raised and lowered people in all classes. For the common folk, marriages into landed farmsteads, apprenticeships in better-paid crafts, and the opportunity to study for the lower clergy were the most promising social escalators. For the bourgeois and noble classes, it was moneyed marriages and princely offices that led to higher things, sometimes aided by university study or entrepreneurial intrepidity and success. Among commoners, descent into the lower depths followed especially from untimely spousal deaths where small children were present, from bad harvests and debts, and from reckless living. For men, it often ended in service among the socially scorned mercenary soldiery and for women in prostitution.

ECONOMIC LIFE

The Thirty Years War inundated the German lands with the greatest wave of mortality to engulf them between the bubonic plague (“Black Death”) of the fourteenth century and World War II in the twentieth century. It left wide swaths of the Holy Roman Empire, town and village alike, in smoking ruins. Battle, famine, and plague killed millions, and uprooted and dispersed millions more. As we saw, the Empire’s population in 1648 was about 25 percent lower than in 1618. And while the worst seventeenth-century losses were surmounted between the 1720s and the 1760s, mid eighteenth-century war mowed down new victims. Multi-year harvest crises, accompanied by soaring mortality, occurred, with regional variations, in the early 1690s, around 1710, in the late 1730s, and again in the early 1770s. The subsequent years, down to 1815, witnessed brisk population growth, nourished by the spread of the hitherto little relished potato – a seventeenth-century gift of South America – as a staple garden crop and household food.

Recovery from war and famine – the one usually sporadic and localized, the other infrequent – usually gained momentum from falling marriage ages, reflecting opportunities for household formation opened to surviving youth by elders’ death. Familiar economic structures – farmsteads, artisan workshops, townhouses – were easily rebuilt, the technologies sustaining them, refined over the centuries, easily reinstated. The accustomed routines of agriculture,

including restoring the livestock it required, depended mainly – apart from tool-making wood, harness leather, and blacksmith's iron – on human labor and time.

Early modern European international trade benefited Germany mostly through the commerce of Hamburg and other German port cities, largely spared by the Thirty Years War's ravages. Cottage-industrial networks supplied cheap flax-spun linens for export, including to overseas slave colonies. The Junker estates of the north and east sent grain and forest products abroad, while from southern Germany and Habsburg-ruled Bohemia various manufactures travelled to eastern and Danubian Europe. But most of Germany's agricultural and industrial production circulated within the Empire's large, if toll-burdened, domestic market.

The absolutist state, apart from the war-related manufactures it subsidized and protected, followed an import-substitution policy, seeking especially to raise up domestic luxury industries. Their products, it was hoped, would satisfy the propertied classes' hearty appetite for prestigious foreign manufactures of fine textiles, furniture, glassware, and decorative artworks, especially from Latin lands and the Low Countries. Frederick the Great's government strained to enable Prussian manufacturers to match Florence's silk and nearby Dresden's porcelain. It hectored the Prussian nobility (and wealthy Berlin Jews) to content themselves with these sometimes second-best goods, while acrid local tobacco was mandated in place of the expensive, bullion-draining imported original. Unsurprisingly, smuggling flourished across Germany's myriad borders.

Efficiency gains occurred through the spread of merchant-organized cottage-industrial production and the rise of pre-industrial factories or "manufactories," which emerged especially in textiles, as in the silkworks of Krefeld. They concentrated numerous workers outside the structures of the guild system (which favored an elaborate, disarticulated division of labor) in centralized workplaces, though without the benefit of the steam-driven machinery that distinguished the British Industrial Revolution. Throughout Europe, water power had long energized technologically sophisticated industrial processes in grain, lumber, and other kinds of milling.

By the early nineteenth century, Germany counted manufactories by the thousands and had, in Prussian mining, begun to employ the steam engine for pumping. As the industrial revolution arrived from across the English Channel, German entrepreneurs proved receptive and adaptive

to it. Investment of capital in coal-driven industrialization, which in Germany pivoted on expensive railroad technology, required nineteenth-century innovations in banking and state policy. Masses of artisan producers depending on their own muscle-power eventually came to ruin through mechanized competition, though others found jobs in the new factories. Labor recruitment into burgeoning German industry required an end to peasant subjection. Governments began, hesitantly, to carry out the subject farmers' personal legal emancipation and transformation of their feudal tenures into freehold farms, typically against compensation in cash or land to their former lordships.

As we will see, Prussia pioneered this two-fold process, launching in the years 1807-1816 a bureaucratically micro-managed freehold-conversion process that stretched to 1848 and beyond. Austria and the south German states found it easier to improve the peasantry's personal legal standing than to endow them with freehold farms, in whose absence the productivity gains of capitalist market agriculture, and the migration of emancipated labor from village to industrial site, were slower to materialize. Still, everywhere in the early nineteenth century redundant hands gravitated away from agriculture. As the technology of the Industrial Revolution came into reach, German entrepreneurs seized it, confident of possession of a cheap industrial labor force, though a contingent of indispensable adult skilled workers commanded higher wages.

In the eighteenth century, the greatest innovations, alongside absolutist industries and middle-class entrepreneurs' manufactories, occurred in large-scale agriculture, especially on northern and eastern aristocratic estates and state-owned domain farms. Here widespread abandonment of traditional fallow-based cereal cultivation yielded a novel "convertible agriculture" (known earlier in the Low Countries and coastal Germany). Cereals now rotated with new fodder crops (turnips, potatoes, clover), while plowland alternated with pasture, significantly raising large-scale farming's output and profitability.

Such "agricultural capitalization," as it has been called, was often the work of leaseholders of middle-class origin managing the nobility's (and princely governments') large estates. They, alongside many noble proprietors (or "gentlemen farmers") working with commoner bailiffs, took the risks of technological innovation for the profits it promised. These and other agricultural investments, including arable expansion through wetland drainage funded by princely governments, helped moderate the rise of grain and other food prices accompanying population

growth after the mid-eighteenth century. Favorable producer markets coined profits among agriculturalists, including millions of traditionalist village farmers locally selling their modest surpluses, thus invigorating demand in Germany for low-end manufactures.

It was long customary among historians and political writers to deplore low pre-industrial living standards. This resulted in part from industrialization-friendly modern liberalism, and in part from class-conscious Marxism. It also reflected a tendency to project the widespread poverty occasioned by urban proletarianization in the nineteenth century farther back into the early modern period. Structural poverty did indeed afflict those at the bottom of the pre-industrial social scale, but it was far from the common fate, even if it ballooned in times of war and food shortages. Only a small percentage of the population lived in want unrelieved by access to garden land, livestock-holding (if only a cow or a goat), occasional labor, and family or communal support.

Pre-modern average life expectancy within whole countries was low, but for the roughly three-quarters of the population who successfully ran the perilous gauntlet of infant and childhood diseases, longevity in later years improved notably. Epidemics – especially of smallpox and respiratory disease – and, for women, child-bearing dangers swept away many adults. Death lurked in anyone's shadow, but often he proved patient in claiming his harvest. There were numerous patriarchs and matriarchs.

Many people lived humbly, but not miserably. Many possessed claims on communal or seigneurial resources, such as grazing and firewood rights and jobs providing various payments *in natura* (including food), which modern social and economic history finds easier to overlook than laboriously translate into assets alongside what were often, for workers, modest money wages. Except in crisis years – which might affect the average individual once, twice, thrice in life (or even never) – village farmers and urban craftsmen ate, dressed, slept, raised their children, celebrated their holidays, and passed the stations of life in a decency that does not deserve the condescension of posterity.

To acknowledge this is not to exaggerate feudal benevolence, though this certainly manifested itself, if irregularly. It recognizes, among other things, that ordinary people, though accustomed to bow to authority, understood something of self-defense, especially at the level of the village commune or guild corporation. This they staged through sometimes generations-long appeals to

the law and, more summarily, through strikes, boycotts, or rougher forms of insubordination which, when collective, were much harder to quell through judicial or military punishment than individual rebelliousness.

CULTURAL LIFE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE THIRTY YEARS WAR

Among ordinary people, the cultural bedrock of life remained religion intermixed with folk knowledge and wisdom. Yet, as society restabilized after the Thirty Years War, adult men and women increasingly displayed the elemental literacy that came with Protestantism, Baroque-era Catholic Church reform, and the rise of the absolutist state. This accomplishment manifested itself minimally in an ability to decipher holy scripture and the hymnal, if not to sign one's name with confidence. Throughout the eighteenth century, many among the common folk displayed a robust appetite for devotional and inspirational tracts and for broadsheets that reported recent news – especially sensations, catastrophes, and prophecies. Protestant piety encouraged introspective autobiography among those with a bent for writing, if only for the desk drawer. Eventually, at the eighteenth century's close, folk-savants appeared, publishing their gritty but hopeful life stories and other compositions to the applause of the newly enlightened upper classes.

The sons and daughters of the propertied upper classes, both bourgeois and noble, moved beyond basic literacy to varying degrees of familiarity with their age's high culture. Until the mid-eighteenth century, this was framed within, and meant to express and reinforce, theologically orthodox Christianity in its prevalent German forms. Thereafter, among many university graduates active as officials or within the learned professions, and among the intelligentsia of artists and writers, Christian orthodoxy weakened. Challenging it was metaphysical Deism, which conceived God as the creator of the rational universe, though it also often perpetuated (sometimes unwittingly) Christian concepts and imagery from sacred history.

There arose as well an influential, quasi-religious aesthetics of nature, expressed as pantheism and sometimes attacked by establishment theologians as "Spinozan atheism" (in reference to seventeenth-century dissident thinker Baruch Spinoza, who found reason and God coterminous in nature). Yet the German Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*], dawning in the late seventeenth century and reaching high noon a century later, retained a strong religious sensibility, even as it

increasingly turned away from Baroque-age Christian orthodoxy. In France and England, by contrast, Enlightenment culture's embrace of secular-minded rationalism, empiricism, and (in varying degrees) materialism was more ardent. Many leading figures in German intellectual and cultural life were the sons of Protestant divines. Many, too, had studied theology at university.

In Protestant Germany, the late seventeenth-century emergence of Pietism represented a sea change. Though guided by clergymen, this was a revitalization movement among lay-people, aimed at personalization and subjectivization of faith beyond mere rote observance, missionizing and inspirational publishing, and ministrations to social needs for poor-relief and education. Though comparable movements arose elsewhere in Germany, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Prussian monarchy patronized Pietism, both to its own advantage – through Pietism's reinforcement in public life of an ethic of work and duty – and that of the movement, whose institutions gained royal funding, though this ended after 1740 under the freethinking and skeptical Frederick II.

Such celebrated and brilliant Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment writers as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, Novalis (Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg), Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel displayed a striking talent for imagining humanity's identity and destiny as unfolding toward (a perhaps never wholly to be attained) fulfillment in historical time. Conversion of Christianity's salvational narrative into a corresponding conception of earthly progress, whether cumulative or revolutionary, toward a final (that is, teleological) end – Reason, Freedom, Democracy, God-like Self-Knowledge – occurred wherever the Enlightenment shone, but nowhere more brightly than in Germany. Doubtless the influence of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz helps explain this characteristic, for this earliest, widely read, multi-talented luminary of German philosophical and scientific rationalism also strove toward an understanding of the world in which Divine Providence enabled humanity to attain, in historical time, moral and intellectual self-perfection.

THE GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT'S ORIGINALITY

Though we are accustomed to think of the European Enlightenment's ideas as seeds of revolution – 1776 in the Thirteen American Colonies, 1789 in France – in Germany they first helped strengthen and re-legitimize the system of monarchical absolutism (though later their

liberal and democratic implications grew clearer). Leibniz became the first post-1648 German philosopher of European stature. Against Christian religious orthodoxy's preoccupation with humanity's fallen nature, he emphasized a divinely inspired drive within human life toward moral and intellectual "fulfillment" [*Vervollkommnung*].

Yet Pietism, though not unmindful of Man's sinfulness, also contributed to the emergent *Aufklärung*, especially through its orientation toward charitable and educational works. At the Pietist-influenced Prussian University of Halle, Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff introduced the basic ideas of the western European Enlightenment, especially those of natural law and natural rights, to which German philosopher Samuel von Pufendorf had earlier made contributions influential also in the Anglo-American world. Thomasius also pioneered Latin's replacement as the language of university lectures with German, advancing the process of associating the vernacular language with a specifically German modern intellectual culture.

The European Enlightenment's basic principles held that the Divine Creator structured the physical and human world according to inherent and invariable laws and endowed human beings with the faculty of reason, enabling them to perceive both the laws of nature and humanity's path toward a rationally structured felicity on earth. That is, God enabled them to discover and apply the liberating tools of scientific understanding – here, Isaac Newton's universal laws of physics were celebrated as paradigmatic – as well as to grasp the right (available first and foremost to rationally educated men) to individual freedom and self-determination, including through representative, constitutional government (of which Englishman John Locke was widely hailed as the incontrovertible philosopher).

The Enlightenment's progress was also aesthetic, making art and literature paths to moral and intellectual ennoblement. These were ideas brought to eloquent expression in Germany by the dramatist Lessing, the philosopher of art Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and the poet of genius, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose early works – such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) – proclaimed an anti-authoritarian, socially critical message of cultured individualism, emotional liberation, and aestheticism.

German political and social thought assigned pride of place, through most of the eighteenth century, to "enlightened absolutism." Its theory, known in the Anglophone world from the writings of Englishman Thomas Hobbes, held that human beings exited the (hypothesized)

primeval state of nature to enter into a social contract whereby, for the sake of peace and security, they created a sovereign monarchy to rule irrevocably over them. Yet this monarchy was bound, both by reason and self-interest, to seek the social good, rather than its own narrow self-aggrandizement. Frederick II, the intellectually gifted Prussian “philosopher-king,” embraced such ideas, arguing that “the king is the first servant of the state.” In his conception, “the state” figured as a power higher than the monarch, and one that, in *raison d'état* (“reason of state”), possessed its own rational necessity – namely, to pursue only those diplomatic, military, economic, and social ends that would maximally strengthen it against hostile powers and enrich it domestically.

There were, that is, laws of statecraft the ruler was bound to follow – on pain otherwise of self-extinction. Frederick recognized the inequality prevailing among his subjects (nobles, burghers, villagers), but argued that greater rights imposed higher duties. It was the state’s obligation to rationalize and perfect society by applying reason’s principles to all public projects, including the Christian religion, whose precepts needed to be reinterpreted so as to harmonize with Enlightenment ideas.

It was a crucial development in German history that Frederick’s Prussia patronized and even co-opted the German Enlightenment, which came to stamp the state’s political culture very strongly. Masses of mainly middle-class university graduates streamed into civil service and clerical posts, in which they preached the union of the Prussian kingdom and Enlightenment philosophy. In this view, heartily shared by Frederick II, the Prussian state figured as an engine of rational progress and prosperity. State power [*Macht*] served reason [*Vernunft*]. This is an equation that never acquired general assent in eighteenth-century France or England, however much the state there was respected (and feared) by its subjects. But by the later eighteenth century, largely because of the example of Frederickian Prussia, but also thanks to Maria Theresa’s and Joseph II’s Austrian reforms, “enlightened monarchy” set the political standard throughout Germany.

This trend heightened the self-confidence and the actual importance of the educated middle classes, which supplied most of the university graduates who subsequently distinguished themselves as Enlightenment intellectuals, skilled professionals, and state servants (though these ranks also included numerous nobles’ sons). Such middle-class graduates came to form a specific class in modern German society: the “educated middle class” or “educated bourgeoisie”

[*Bildungsbürgertum*]. They increasingly set the intellectual and cultural tone, in contrast to the preceding era's aristocratic court culture. They supplied the cultural producers who crafted both the modern German language and a new German literature of European greatness. They, too, formed the public, and contributed the inspirational ideas that – especially in the persons of Johann Sebastian Bach, Joseph Haydn, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – helped raise German music to European heights.

Frederick II's preference for writing and speaking in French – he once said provocatively (and falsely) that he spoke German only with his horse – increasingly branded him in the eyes of the educated middle class as a man of the past. It was they, too, who formed the greater part of the German reading and theater-going public, and of the intellectually ambitious group that struggled to comprehend the thought of Immanuel Kant.

Kant synthesized many strands of the German and European Enlightenment in a body of ideas still widely regarded today as the greatest philosophical achievement since Aristotle. In three books of the 1770s and 1780s (the critiques of “pure reason” or rational knowledge, “practical reason” or morality, and aesthetic “judgment”), Kant set Enlightenment thought on new foundations. In response to advancing eighteenth-century philosophical skepticism (such as David Hume's) questioning the inherent rationality of nature (and human freedom too), Kant argued – in his self-described “Copernican revolution in philosophy” – that it was not the realm of things outside human consciousness that was necessarily and ascertainably rational. It was, rather, the human mind itself, which was so structured as to organize all perceptions according to the categories of space, time, and causality. The human mind does not mirror a rational nature, but constructs it.

Human reason, Kant said, is nature's lawgiver. Nature may indeed be inherently rational. Though the mind cannot know this with certainty, it must try to comprehend the “thing-in-itself” outside human consciousness, such as the physical universe, as if it did possess the attributes reason ascribes to it. As for morality, while reason will argue that all human actions are causally explicable by pre-existing conditions, and in that sense pre-determined, our possession of an unconstrained moral will – an idea Kant shared with the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he admired – enables us to act freely as moral agents if we consciously chose to do so. The moral law resides, not outside us, but within us, creating a potential – still far from fully realized – for ethical self-determination independent of divine power. As for aesthetics, the

artist's mission is, similarly, not to bow to external authority, but to generate from within an independent and autonomous creative will.

Kant's political philosophy, which, on account of Prussian censorship during the period of the French Revolution, was difficult for him to express with full freedom, emphasized the primacy of government under the rule of law (the *Rechtsstaat* or "state of law"). He insisted on the separation of executive and legislative powers, but left parliamentary or representative government in theoretical shadow. His philosophy of history proposed that advancing trade (the sphere of the commercial and industrial middle classes) would work to unify the states of the world, bringing war into such disrepute – and making it so counter-productive economically – that perpetual peace would result.

This was a vision of emancipatory progress in history typical of the Enlightenment. In his social and economic thought, Kant was an admirer of the Scotsman Adam Smith, another towering figure of the age, who argued for the interplay in free capitalist markets of supply and demand undistorted as far as possible by state power. Altogether, Kant stands as the philosophical godfather of nineteenth-century German liberalism.

Kant wanted his philosophy to serve as a cosmopolitan science and a politics of self-determination through representative government and the market economy. But the intellectuals who succeeded him after 1789 were inclined to take his emphasis on the primacy of reason as a warrant to favor the primacy of thought itself, or spirit [*Geist*], over the material world. This tendency did not favor the empiricist philosophy that conquered Western Europe and North America. But in the mighty construction of thought and the world that flowed from the pen of Hegel, Kantian reason (fused with metaphysical spirit) becomes the author of the physical world itself, and through the historical actions of humanity – above all, through the creations of religion, philosophy, and art – realizes itself concretely in the world.

Hegel's state exists to shield and promote humanity's cultural inventions, and to structure human community so as to enable the individual to find identity through social bonds and achieve moral self-awareness. The state structures the nation. Though reality is driven forward, as is thought itself, by the endless clash and resolution of contradictions (or dialectical self-transcendence) – a process that generates much tragic conflict and destruction in history –

Hegel preserved a Leibnizian (and quasi-Christian) serenity about the world's meaningfulness, both in its present moment and in its trajectory.

One of Hegel's conceptual building blocks, which had loomed small in Kant's thinking, was the nation. As the communal, cultural-historical counterpart to rationalism's individualist bias, this idea preoccupied such Enlightenment thinkers as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. In Germany, Kant's friend and contemporary Johann Gottfried von Herder won a broad readership by expounding history as a drama of national cultures or "peoples" [*Völker* (singular: *Volk*)]. This contrasted with the conception of history, beloved by the western Enlightenment, as the progress of the universal human mind achieved by revolutionary individual thinkers, from Aristotle to Newton.

In Herder's view, as in that of subsequent German Romanticism and historically framed nationalism, identity flowed from culture (or from one's "people"). Nations were anthropological collectivities, traversing – in Herder's view, at least – a centuries-long cycle of childhood, maturity, and senescence. Yet the trend, on a world-historical scale, was for modern nations to awaken to themselves through the kiss of consciousness bestowed on them by the intellectuals and artists whom the *Volk* brought forth in time's fullness. Thus enlivened, the multifarious peoples would assume a political form appropriate to their individual genius (yet – providentially – also democratic and pacifist), and contribute to the sum of human self-realization through their cultural originality. Such a vision, in harmony with many Enlightenment ideas, inspired early German nationalism, even if the passions (and humiliations) of the Napoleonic wars infused in many of its apostles, such as Fichte, a warlike disposition foreign to the anti-absolutist, anti-militarist Herder.

Romanticism joins the German Enlightenment, Philosophical Idealism (as the Hegelian tradition is known), and early nationalism as the fourth great flowering of culture in the eighteenth century. It expressed the emotionalism and subjectivism that Protestant Pietism and Baroque Catholicism had earlier valorized. It drew, especially in the genial poetry and prose of Goethe, on the eighteenth-century attainment of a sovereign modernity of the German language. The young Goethe gained widespread fame as the irresistible voice of early Romanticism, and though he later sought to transcend Romanticism, it matured in him more than it paled. It coexisted in his consciousness, and that of his great Romantic co-titan Friedrich Schiller, with a reverence for the artistic achievements of Classical Greece. These achievements inspired,

especially through the writings of Winckelmann, a virtual cult of Greek antiquity among the German intelligentsia. The ancient Greeks were a mirror into which early German nationalists, imagining their historical affinities, preferred to gaze instead of joining in the veneration of Rome characteristic of French and Anglo-American political culture.

Romanticism embraced the Enlightenment's emphasis on the claims of the individual, unburdened by traditional Christianity's Original Sin, to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But it also broadened the meaning of happiness to include the acceptance of "irrational" passion and exaltation and the meaning to be discovered in emotional pain and even death. Beethoven's music, though it is more than Romanticism, expresses this expansion of aesthetic-philosophical sensibility. It was not difficult for Novalis, and other Romantics who followed him in the nineteenth century, to rediscover Christian faith, if often idiosyncratically. Equally, German nationalism fit Romanticism like a glove. Indeed, Romanticism's ability to fuse with expressions of both hyper-individualism and communitarianism qualify it, alongside social-political utopianism, as the commanding mentality of modernity.

LATE-ENLIGHTENMENT TENSIONS

While the persistence of feudal-aristocratic social structures and absolutist state regulation of economic life may – as Adam Smith's followers held – have slowed the advance of industry and commerce, economic growth both in this sphere and in agriculture in the period 1770-1806 was rapid, multiplying the numbers, wealth, and social-political influence of the entrepreneurial middle classes or "propertied bourgeoisie" [*Besitzbürgertum*]. This important group increasingly took its cultural and political bearings from the Enlightenment intellectuals and artists who gave voice to the educated middle class (that is, the aforementioned *Bildungsbürgertum*).

In the late eighteenth century, many members of both groups, including civil servants, began demanding changes in the system of "enlightened absolutism." They objected to the survival of both legally encoded and *de facto* aristocratic privileges, as in noble monopolies of possession of rural lordships, and in privileged noble access to the highest military, diplomatic, and courtly posts. Enlightenment philosophy, after all, implied the ultimate equality of all rational beings, while the music and literature of this cultural era, known today as German Classicism,

questioned aristocratic pretension and exclusivity while pillorying, in allusions to unpopular contemporary rulers, the “tyrants” of old.

After the outbreak of the French Revolution, Prussia followed Austria in drawing back from the path of Enlightenment reforms, fearing that their egalitarian or “leveling” tendency would encourage political radicalization and revolt. In Prussia, the codification of state law begun in Frederick II’s reign sparked controversy in 1791-1794 when the question arose as to whether such a legislative compendium could, in quasi-constitutional manner, bind and limit the monarch’s will. The 1794 version of the General Law Code [*Allgemeines Landrecht*] conservatively eliminated any such possibilities. Simultaneously, it became evident that the absolutist system was not coping well with a spreading social crisis, the result of rapid population expansion (from – within the Empire – some twenty-three million in 1750 to about thirty-one million in 1800). Rising numbers of uprooted and pauperized people appeared on urban streets and country roads.

The spread of capitalist-organized cottage industry and early forms of factory production multiplied an ill-paid proletariat. Against the background of the French Revolution, fears of lawless vagabonds and mob violence circulated among the propertied classes. The more sophisticated middle-class response was to call, in the spirit of Adam Smith, for economic liberalism, that is, a market economy freed of heavy government regulation and class privileges, allowing entrepreneurially energetic individuals of all stations in life access, as the contemporary phrase put it, to “careers open to talent.” The heavy expenses of militaristic monarchy should be cut, and the antiquated system of guild-bound, monopolistic artisan handicraft production abolished, freeing such trades to all comers. Subject villagers should be released from feudal rents and given their farms in freehold, leaving noble landlords to adjust to an economy based on wage labor and free markets.

In the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the system of absolutism in Germany faced increasingly sharp criticism on both philosophical-ideological and practical grounds. This criticism was formulated mainly by middle-class intellectuals and members of the nobility whose university education drew them toward their middle-class counterparts. Yet in Austria and other German states, and above all in the kingdom of Prussia, the absolutist system had created a centralized and militarized bureaucratic monarchy served by a self-confident and privileged elite of officials, many noble-born or ennobled, many of middle-class origins but loyal to the regime

employing them. Such a system constituted a formidable obstacle to the advance of Enlightenment-based, opposition-minded constitutional-parliamentary liberalism. As the future would show, this division of power favored, not revolution, but reform from above, through compromises between liberal middle classes and military-aristocratic monarchy. This would become the Prussian path to nineteenth-century political modernity.

CONCLUSION: THREE SPIRITS OF THE AGE

It is worthwhile to cast a backward glance at styles of thought and life that jostled one another on the late eighteenth-century German stage, at least among the educated, propertied, and empowered classes. One can make out three distinctive world-views (with corresponding “life-worlds”) that coexisted and competed with each other (and with a fourth, which began to take shape at the era’s end). The oldest among them was the social and religious traditionalism that might be called the “Christian vision of an estates-bound world.” Much in evidence after the Thirty Years War, adherents to this world-view clung to religious orthodoxy as it had crystallized in the conflicts leading up to the “great German war,” as it was called by some. Faith in one’s creed and loyalty to its clerics and officials alone promised salvation. As for worldly life, a conservative and hierarchical mentality accompanied religious orthodoxy. It saw in the received traditions of the late medieval and Renaissance-era “estates polity” [*Ständestaat*] the promise of social equilibrium. Each collective interest in society, peasantry and the poor included, deserved – and would gain – just consideration under the joint rule of the prince and the corporately organized elites.

Throughout the Holy Roman Empire, the Westphalian treaty’s modifications of the imperial constitution seemed to strengthen the longstanding ideal of harmonious power-sharing between the emperor and the Reich-level estates – particularly territorial rulers, both lay and ecclesiastical. Such a perspective on German life persisted into the Napoleonic era, when many of the political structures it valued – from the Empire itself to seigneurial and other small-scale forms of feudal lordship – collapsed or were abolished through conquest, impotence, and ideological delegitimization. Yet this mentality experienced *rebirth* in the form of nineteenth-century social and political conservatism, invoking the alliance of throne and altar and restamping the coin of old-regime lordship and liberties with the insignia of a patriarchally conceived modern market economy and property rights.

A second world-view emerged in the mid-seventeenth century, associated with the rise of military-bureaucratic monarchy. It can be imagined as “state-building realism.” Understanding itself to be bold and modern, it paid as much homage as inbred religiosity and self-interested appreciation of feudal privilege allowed to *raison d'état*, Machiavellian militarism and diplomacy, ruthless fiscalism, and bureaucratic and judicial rationalization. It redefined the subject population not by their prescriptive rights and liberties, but rather by their duties to the new and abstract “state” that was rising – or so adherents to this view hoped – into the human clouds. To many it seemed natural to ascribe this development to God’s will. Religious conservatives who loudly opposed it – like aristocrats who doggedly fought against state aggrandizement – suffered the sting of princely disgrace and sometimes even sharper sanctions.

This mentality also persisted through the eighteenth century, as it does, in more modern dress, to the present day. It was shared, then as now, by business entrepreneurs, especially those working profitably with the power-state. But in the mid-eighteenth century, it encountered a challenge in the form of a third world-view, which we may term “Enlightenment utopianism.” This was the broader outlook of which adherence to “enlightened absolutism” was one influential expression. Fundamental was the ambition to remake the human world in the image of the rationality of Nature which Galileo and Newton and other luminaries of the Scientific Revolution had discovered.

Ideal humanity found its reflection in Enlightenment culture’s theoretical blueprints, which sketched out the rational organization of state, society, economy, and indeed of everything human. The fulfillment of such inspired imaginings might be attempted, top down, through “enlightened despotism,” but it could also be sought, bottom up, through national and social-political revolution, as in the American colonies in 1776 and France in 1789. It was a view that, in conservative or moderate form, imagined an enlightened human elite managing the affairs of popular masses who were still (or perhaps forever) unqualified for self-determination. Ideologically dressed as democratic egalitarianism, it could envision the attainment by “all men,” and perhaps by all people, of rationally informed voice and political participation.

Crucial was its pursuit of “enlightened reform” as a rational and emancipatory end in itself and as a snowballing venture that would cleanse and perfect every corner of human life. Adam Smith’s prescription of market freedom as people’s entry-ticket to such shares of earthly felicity

as their talents and energy justified found a strong echo in late eighteenth-century Germany, when the government-driven economic strategies of the “state-building realists” began to lose their transformative power and plausibility. Above all, this life perspective assumed rational mastery of the world by enlightened individuals, whether elites or everyone. Reason would dissolve all superstitious mysteries. All expressions of human life, including those of emotion and aesthetic response, would gain illumination through rational analysis. Art, given proper form, would enrich and edify the enlightened mind. Science and technology would switch on ever more real-life lights.

This mentality survived as nineteenth- and twentieth-century rationalist liberalism or progressivism – but only on the condition that it linked itself to one or another doctrine of communalism. For even if rational individuals are the prime actors in life’s drama, the question must arise: in what social setting do they exert themselves? In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany, the answer was, at first, the reforming power-state, guided by enlightened genius (whether the ruler’s or the ruling bureaucracy’s). But German nationalism’s emergence raised the possibility of “the German people” or *Volk* itself attaining rational felicity by its own actions within a self-determining German nation. This was the vision, above all, of liberal nationalism. Later, Marxism – the invention of a Hegelian-educated German born in the Rhineland in 1818 – would substitute proletariat for “bourgeois nation,” though in the end it proved unrealistic to pretend that “the worker has no fatherland.”

The fourth discernible world-view may be called the “Romantic-historicist” temperament. Though it might respect “Enlightenment utopianism,” it could not adopt its secular faith, for the Romantic vision valorized the mysteries, natural and human, that Enlightenment reason hoped to dispel or harness. And the historicist vision showed that cultural particularism outweighed human universals, and that all things human passed, including the “age of Reason” itself. The best refuge, therefore, was the historically evolving national culture out of which each individual emerged.

The destiny of the German *Volk* was to achieve self-consciousness through the state – ideally, the national state. Reason, power, and communal emotion would combine to forge a national life, unlike others elsewhere, expressive of the genius of the whole people and its individual constituents. This was the vision of post-liberal, though not necessarily anti-liberal,

communitarian German nationalism which, like all modern nationalisms, preserves an element of the mysticism that had earlier inspired civilizations resting on religious self-understanding.

Yet, as subsequent history has shown, the nation-state is much more than an idea or a source of identity. It is the main stage on which humanity – which Kant likened to “crooked timber” – has enacted its projects of modernity. The drama enacted on this stage in the period 1914-1945 proved calamitous. But, at the end of the period 1648-1815, the actors in the twentieth-century tragedy had not yet entered the anteroom of history. Their ideological dress had not been cut, and their scripts had not been written. Instead, as the documents assembled here show, the years of the French Revolution and Napoleon witnessed in Germany – famously in Prussia, but also in the states gathered in the French-dominated Confederation of the Rhine, especially Bavaria, Baden, and Württemberg – beneficial reforms of state and society. Confronting and in many ways creatively responding to the challenges of the post-1789 European scene were the essential ideas presented here: defense of historic rights and interests, Enlightenment rationalism and statist realism, enthusiasm for “liberty, equality, fraternity,” and imaginings of German unity.

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