

# GERMANY

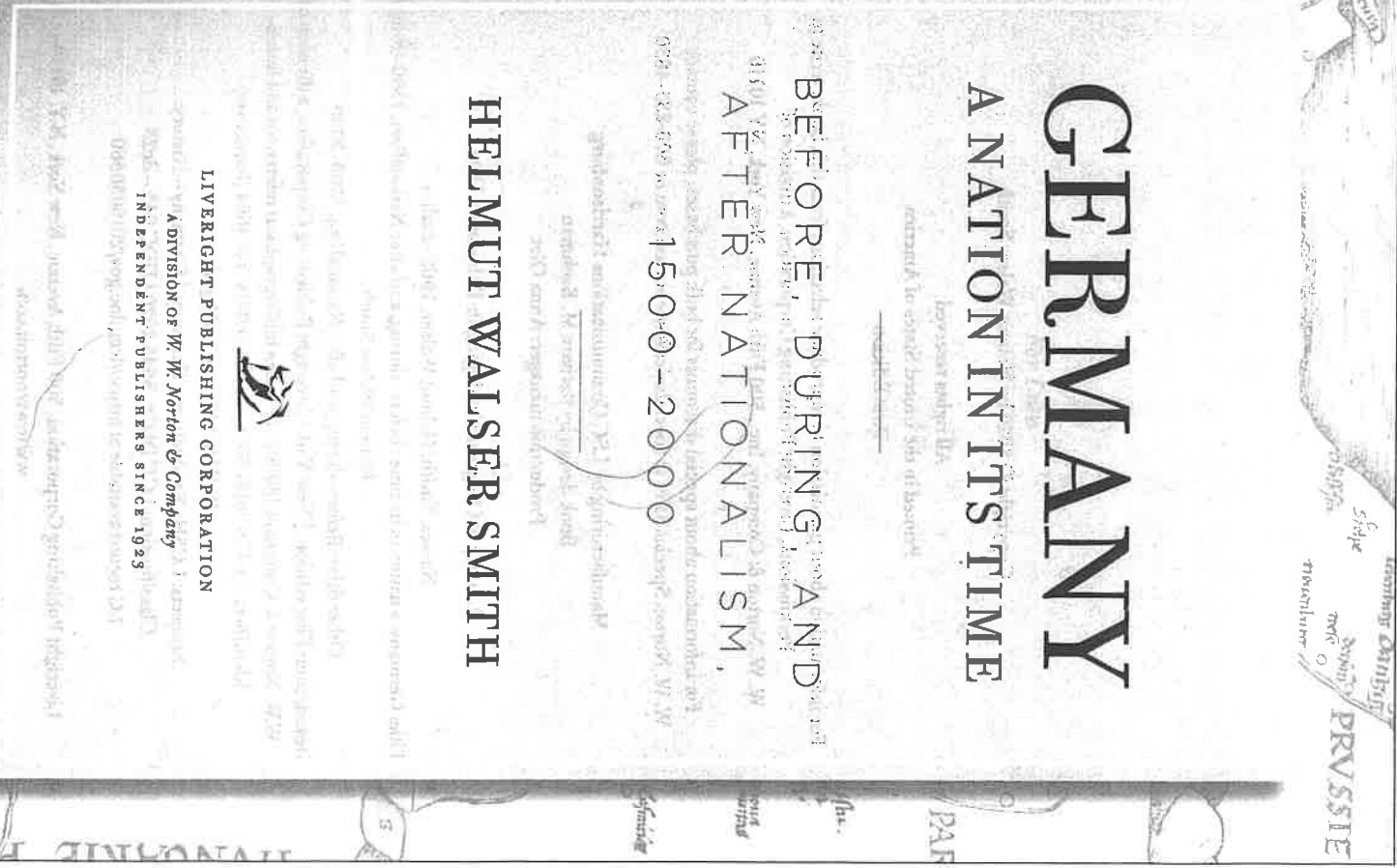
## A NATION IN ITS TIME

BEFORE, DURING, AND  
AFTER NATIONALISM,

BY  
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# CONTENTS

## LIST OF MAPS

ix

## INTRODUCTION

xi

### PART I THE NATION BEFORE NATIONALISM

1

1. Seeing Germany for the First Time (c. 1500) 3
2. "Germany . . . As If in a Mirror" (c. 1500-1580) 31
3. The Tears of Stoics (c. 1580-1700) 58

### PART II THE COPERNICAN TURN

83

4. Partition and Patriotism (c. 1700-1770) 91
5. The Surface and the Interior (c. 1770-1790) 119
6. *De l'Allemagne* (c. 1790-1815) 150

### PART III THE AGE OF NATIONALISM

191

7. Developing Nation (c. 1815-1850) 199
8. Nation Shapes (c. 1850-1870) 234
9. Objective Nation (c. 1870-1914) 261

PART IV	<b>THE NATIONALIST AGE</b>	<b>291</b>
10.	Sacrifice For (c. 1914–1933)	308
11.	Sacrifice Of (c. 1933–1941)	337
12.	Death Spaces (c. 1941–1945)	367

## LIST OF MAPS

PART V	<b>AFTER NATIONALISM</b>	<b>407</b>
13.	A Living Concept of Fatherland (c. 1945–1950)	413
14.	The Presence of Compassion (c. 1950–2000)	426

EPILOGUE: The Republic of the Germans at the Beginning of the Twenty-Second Century	461
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	475
NOTES	479
ILLUSTRATION CREDITS	561
INDEX	563

Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini's Sojourns and the Cities and Towns Described in His <i>Germania</i> of 1457–8	8
Maximilian I: Sojourns of the Itinerant Emperor, 1486–1519	14
Major Routes of Erhard Etzlaub's Rome-Way Map of 1500	23
Cities and Towns Mentioned and Described in Johannes Cochlaeus's <i>Brevis Germaniae Descriptio</i> (1512)	28
Cities in Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's <i>Civitates Orbis Terrarum</i> , 1572–1617	56
The Towns and Cities in Matthäus Merian's <i>Topographia Germaniae</i>	74
Major Travel Destinations (Excluding Russia) of Joseph II of Austria	111
Friedrich Nicolai's Journey through Germany in 1781	128
The Travels of Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck in 1793	146
Ernst Moritz Arndt's Europe as Imagined in 1802	168
J.G. Fichte's Republic of the Germans at the Beginning of the 22nd Century	173
Germany after Counterfactual Austrian Victory over Prussia in 1866	256
Kaiser William I Monuments in Imperial Germany, 1870–1902	269
Bismarck Monuments in Imperial Germany, 1890–1917	271

The Places and Occasions of the Public Addresses of the "Traveling Kaiser," 1900-1905 278

Monuments to Writers, Artists, Musicians, and Scholars in Imperial Germany, 1820-1914 284

Germany and the New Europe in Heinrich Class's War Aims Memorandum of 1919 321

Burned and Desecrated Synagogues in Nazi Germany, November 1938 352

Ethnic German Militia Massacres of Poles, Jews, and the "Handicapped," 1939 362

The Ghettos of Occupied Poland, 1941 364

Select German Army POW Camps for Soviet Soldiers, 1941-1942 371

Large Scale Massacres of Jews between June and December, 1941—An Incomplete Map 387

Concentration Camps, Ghettos, Killing Sites: An Incomplete Map, 1941-1945 403

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK IS ABOUT NATION AND NATIONALISM IN GERMANY from 1500 to 2000. Its primary argument is that across five centuries, there were radically different ways of knowing, representing, and experiencing the German nation. It contends that nations, like many other historical phenomena, are neither timeless verities nor arbitrary historical inventions. Rather, they are real or true in different ways in different periods. Put simply, there was no transhistorical concept of the German nation. There was only a nation in its time. German nationalism mapped onto these changing constellations, but it was not the thing itself. There was a Germany before, during, and after nationalism.

This argument implies that the conception of the German nation—not the ideology of German nationalism—is the larger story, with the longer history. In chronological terms, German nationalism had a later beginning; it has gone through an extremely devastating middle phase; and, as is defined here, it may yet have an end. Crystallizing in an unambiguous form for the first time after the French Revolution, German nationalism was an explicitly political ideology that conceived of self and country as one, argued that allegiances to the nation should supersede other loyalties, and bound the male citizen in an unspoken, almost contractual obligation to sacrifice, die, and kill for his country. In the twentieth century, in its radical form, it brought about national cohesion through the persecution, and even expulsion and murder, of others.<sup>1</sup>

Against the grain of a significant interpretive tradition, this book asserts that German nationalists did not engender or invent the German nation.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they transformed its very meaning. The transformation came late in the nation's time line. From our starting point of 1500 (when German

humanists first defined Germany as a nation, pictured it in two-dimensional space, and created a significant number of artifacts that showed it existing among other nations), to our end point of 2000 (when history, at least for now, begins to cede to current affairs), nationalism appeared well beyond the halfway mark of the long and changing history of how Germans imagined and experienced their nation. Encompassing the century between the later part of the Napoleonic Wars and the outbreak of the First World War, the age of nationalism, as this period will be called, was characterized by a social and cultural deepening of the nation on one hand, and nationalism as a powerful set of political ideas defining the nation on the other. Yet even in Imperial Germany on the eve of World War I, nationalism, as we will see, was a crucial but in many ways not yet dominant ideology. Nationalism became the dominant ideology of the age later still, in what we will call the nationalist age, when it provided a compelling if ultimately flawed justification for the sacrifice of life that Germany had required of its citizens during World War I. In its radical variant, nationalism in this period demanded the sacrifice of groups within the nation in order to achieve what to us seems a dystopia of ethnic homogeneity. During World War II, that dystopia ended in the death spaces implied in the Nazi idea of living space. In plain words: it ended with genocide. German nationalism, in this way of seeing it, was not the dark culmination point of a long and destructive history of Germany. Rather, it was a crucial, ultimately devastating, but also historical chapter in that history.

The second argument of the book is about the balance between war and peace in the “*longue durée*” of the German past. Shelves of books have been written on the military history of the German nation. Yet for long stretches of history, Germans conceived of their country as essentially pacific, and their neighbors have often concurred, sometimes in the form of a complaint. “Martial spirit and love of fatherland hardly exist for contemporary Germans,” a dismayed Madame de Staël wrote in 1810. But when her brilliant book, *De l’Allemagne*, finally appeared after the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Nations in Leipzig in October 1813, her insight seemed out of step with events, and it is hardly necessary to recount that no small part of Germany’s subsequent history occurred in the shadow of militarism, military destruction, and violence. Today we know a very different Germany—one concerned with social stability and economic growth rather

than military might and territorial expansion; one that no longer requires its male citizens to serve in the army; and one in which death, to cite the historian Michael Howard, is “no longer part of the social contract.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet peace does not leave us only with blank pages, as Hegel once said of happiness. Rather, in both an absolute and a relative sense, peace has been as important to the long historical arc of the German nation as war. Consider the measure that political scientists use to gauge bellicosity: the so-called conflict catalogue.<sup>4</sup> It charts major and minor conflicts of the last half millennium and estimates their lethality and duration. If one takes 1000 deaths as the threshold for war, filtering out smaller skirmishes, the German lands experienced roughly twice as many years of peace as of war between 1500 and 1914. Overall lethality (even when calculated against estimated population levels) remained low for decades in certain periods, like the eighty years after the Peasants’ War of 1525, the late eighteenth century (after the Seven Years War), and for almost a hundred years after the conclusion of the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Skeptics will no doubt point out that Prussia, a martial state, unified Germany in 1871, and this fact inevitably skews the whole history. Yet this approach commits the error of the “small-Prussian school,” which narrowed German history into an appendage of Prussian history, and forgot that for many decades, Prussia, as has been shown recently, was a weaker and less belligerent power than is often imagined.<sup>5</sup> The message of the conflict catalogue comes still more forcefully to the fore when Germany is considered in comparison with other European nations. It reveals, for example, that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Great Britain and France were the great martial powers; that in central Europe, Austria was a more menacing military might than Prussia; and that the German lands, often thought to be in a vulnerable central position, actually enjoyed more years of peace than many of the neighboring countries.<sup>6</sup>

The third argument of the book is about realism and tragedy. It is perhaps the most abstract of the three arguments, but it nevertheless might open a conceptual door to new ways of thinking about nations. It derives from a line of inquiry pursued by Erich Auerbach, a German-Jewish literary scholar who, between 1942 and 1945, wrote a remarkable work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, while in exile in Istanbul. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach argued that social realistic ways of seeing

are achieved when the age-old, Aristotelian separation of literary styles, according to which only the high- and noble-born are fitting subjects of tragedy, is broken down and the everyday, the common, the low, become the object of “serious, problematic, and even tragical representation.”<sup>7</sup> Auerbach’s test—when a subject or group is capable of eliciting genuinely tragical representation—may also, it is argued in the pages that follow, be seen as a defining moment of compassion implied in national belonging.

The test forces us to think outside the conventional German nationalist narrative and to bring different literary and artistic works—sometimes in the canon, sometimes not—into focus, as well as directing our attention to other, often more ordinary kinds of cultural artifacts of nationhood. One could, for example, construe the hundreds of postwar German communities that commemorated destroyed or damaged synagogues as a turn toward the tragic element of their own hometown landscapes, and as evincing compassion for a group the Germans had persecuted.

It should be stated, as Walter Benjamin once did, that the catastrophes of the twentieth century left only “a ruin, a fragment,” and offered only unfinished insights into the abyss.<sup>8</sup> Yet ruins and fragments can also be the foundation for new growth. In what follows, the focus rests on the possibilities that the past has created for a genuinely new understanding of what the German nation is. For while the argument that the postwar period reveals a “broader repudiation of nationalism,” as one historian writes, rings true, the repudiation was always only partial so long as the fate of Jews and countless other victims of the genocide were not capable (as Auerbach might have put it) of being depicted with tragic seriousness as part of Germany’s own history.<sup>9</sup> This is not a claim about a genre or about a specific literary or artistic form. It is an argument about how a nation summons compassion.

## II

In lectures delivered in 1941 in a German prison camp near Lübeck, the great French historian Fernand Braudel likened history that arcs across large swaths of time to “a very long journey.”<sup>10</sup> For such a journey, he might have added, it is helpful to have a map hinting at what to expect, telling how rugged the terrain will be, and what to find where.

This book has five parts, and each part, except the first, begins with a preface that seeks to outline how the world has changed and to put forward the arguments that follow. The first part, “The Nation Before Nationalism,” depicts the discovery and description of Germany for the first time and chronicles the changing representations of Germany up until the Thirty Years War, while Part II, “The Copernican Turn,” narrates the great shift in the very understanding of what constitutes a nation, analyzing this pivot in three dimensions. It addresses the advent of modern, state-based patriotism in a period when Germany was likely to devolve into separate German-speaking fatherlands; examines new forms of seeing and describing the nation as evidenced in travel journals; and investigates how unambiguous German nationalism crystallized in the context of military defeat.

The third part is called “The Age of Nationalism,” a term borrowed from Immanuel Kant’s famous and often cited question, first posed in 1784, of whether we live in an enlightened age—an idea he negated while conceding that, instead, “we live in an age of enlightenment.”<sup>11</sup> Following and altering Kant’s formulation, “The Age of Nationalism,” covering the years 1815 to 1914, describes Germans seeing, shaping, and representing the nation in new ways, asking what it is, who belongs to it, where its borders are, what its symbols mean, and what the nation might yet become. As with Kant’s use of the term “enlightenment” for the age he lived in, nationalism’s preponderance is still not assumed. As historians of the subject realize, many people remained indifferent to nationalism’s allures, and it divided as much as it unified the nation. Nevertheless, the German nation, which formed as a state in 1871, shaped possibilities, defined identities, and suffused the landscape with objects that made the nation seem, as it were, objective. While war was certainly important to the formation of the German nation in this period, it bears pointing out that a remarkable peace reigned for most of this era.

Part IV, “The Nationalist Age,” is about the period 1914–1945, when two wars cast their shadow over peace, nationalism became the dominant ideology of the age, and radical nationalism came to power, as it did in 1933. In the Third Reich, this form of nationalism brought forth new, albeit destructive, forms of inclusion and exclusion, ultimately shaping Germany into a genocidal nation. Finally, Part V, “After Nationalism,”

addresses the attempt, mainly in the Federal Republic, to cultivate a compassionate, empathetic realism about belonging. The history concludes with an epilogue, in which the rise of a new nationalism in our own time is set into a larger context.

Some of what readers will find in the pages that follow will be unfamiliar. Other parts of the book belong to a known story. Before embarking on the journey, to use Braudel's term, it is perhaps helpful to recall our own *situ*. Despite globalization, we live in a world where precisely mapped countries occupy more than 95 percent of the inhabited surface of the earth, and roughly 97 percent of the world's people will die in the nation of their birth.<sup>12</sup> In 1500, when this book begins, porous empires, indistinct dynastic territories, and small city-states blanketed the land. Nearly three hundred years later, in the middle of our story, this was still true. Political and ethnic units were rarely congruent, and nationality counted for so little that states, when putting together statistics, did not even count it. Indeed, two of Germany's most famous poets, Goethe and Schiller, could still ask, "Germany, but where does it lie?" And in the first line of a jointly written distich reply: "I do not know how to find the country."<sup>13</sup>

This book seeks to answer their question. In its quest, it pays particular attention to descriptive geographies, travel journals, maps, and other kinds of spatial evidence, even plotting points using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in order to see that nations, unlike the distant mountains that seem to float in late Ming paintings, actually have epistemological and experiential ground. In the end, though, it answers the question of Germany, and where it lies, by appeal to temporal frames, and sees Germany as a nation in its time.

# THE NATION BEFORE NATIONALISM