

Introduction

Writing Unbound German Histories

German history was long fraught with problems. It was not just the unsavory political ideologies that historians frequently used to frame its narratives: communism, fascism, imperialism, nationalism, racism, and many other -isms, all of which demanded an appraisal. It was the narratives themselves, which subsumed the histories of German cultures and societies into unitary national accounts that were overdetermined by the chronicle of the German nation-state. Such myopic storylines not only hindered our efforts to understand people's actions and motivations at particular moments in time, but they frequently skewed our interpretations of political forces and their consequences, reifying the very ideologies they were meant to explain.

This is hardly news. For decades, we have been keenly aware that although the German nation-state first emerged in 1871, it has run roughshod over the German past since the moment of its creation, if not before. Many historians of Europe and Germany, echoing their counterparts in other fields, have made careers out of arguing this point. They have underscored the primacy of individuals' and groups' local orientations across German-speaking Europe; they have highlighted the salience and persistence of many Germans' regional affiliations; they have pointed to global trends that flowed powerfully across Europe's national borders; and they have called attention to the sundry people who persisted in living hybrid lives on or around the German nation-state's borders long after they were clearly defined. Many of those people were immersed in multiple cultures and languages, and as we have learned, a good number were indifferent to, or even hostile to, the pronouncements of nationalists who sought to speak about and for them. So too, in fact, were many of the people who lived in the heart of the German nation-state before and long after its creation. Taken together, this work, as it emerged over the last thirty or more years, has demonstrated repeatedly how poorly unitary narratives tied to the nation-state have served Germans and their histories.

If pointing out the inadequacies of a German history wedded to the nation-state has been relatively easy, fashioning alternative narratives has not.

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Unbinding German history is much like decolonizing the western histories of the world. It requires a fundamental rethinking of how our tales of the past have been told and a great deal of reflection on the language we have used to tell them. During the 1980s, for example, James J. Sheehan, who stimulated much of the rethinking that followed over the next four decades, struggled with this conundrum in a series of pivotal essays and books. “What,” he dared to ask, “is German history?” Who participated in it? When and where did it begin?¹ Today, we might also ask where German history went: how far it extended across Europe and the world? And what that extension might mean for the people living in the German nation-state and the rest of Europe today? Yet even if we can find answers to those questions, we are still left with the problem of their narration: How do we judiciously tell the many continuous, discontinuous, overlapping, persistent, and simultaneous tales that constitute German history?

The answer depends on what we want to achieve with our narratives. Consequently, we have to start with self-reflection, with acute attention to how our own goals and interests affect the tales we tell. That is challenging. Given my goals, however, it is imperative: At the very least, I believe that historical knowledge exerts power. I also believe that historians’ chief mission is consciousness-raising. It is our job to demonstrate how and why history matters. To do that, we must strive to better understand people’s actions, intentions, and motivations in particular historical moments, and that, in turn, requires us to shake off persistent reifications, exposing the limitations of dominant paradigms, and pursuing a totality of the past despite the dictates of reigning teleologies. In the case of modern German history, that means moving beyond a focus on tragic acts, radical ruptures, and the crimes of colonialism, imperialism, and National Socialism that have dominated the historiography and shaped our inquiries for generations. I do not mean to suggest that we ignore those parts of German history any more than I would advocate disregarding the emergence and preponderance of the German nation-state. That is not the point. Rather, it is my contention that we cannot let the nation-state dictate our histories of the modern era to us, and I believe the intellectual and political stakes of resisting its hegemonic position and shaking off its teleologies are high: For within an unbound German history there are characteristics, clues, models, and precedents that can do much to undermine the return of violent, exclusionary nationalism that cannot be achieved only by a preponderance of revelations about past crimes.

¹ James J. Sheehan, “What Is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography,” *The Journal of Modern History* 53, no. 1 (1981): 1–23.

Sheehan's Conundrum

At the end of the 1980s, as James Sheehan published his masterful history of Germany between 1770 and 1866, he exposed many of the challenges of narrating a unitary German history even as he fell victim to others.² It is instructive to examine his effort. It has much to teach us about the cunning teleology of national histories as well as their many limitations.

Right from the outset, Sheehan struggled with the question of how to write a German national history during a period in which there was no nation-state. The challenge, as he saw it, was that his history of Germany needed to begin with “the equally obvious and no less significant fact that ‘Germany’ did not exist.”³ “In the second half of the eighteenth century,” he explained, much “as in the second half of the twentieth, there is no clear and readily acceptable answer to the question of Germany’s political, social, and cultural identity.” Then, he added one of his greatest insights: “to suppose otherwise is to miss the essential character of the German past and the German present: its diversity and discontinuity, richness and fragmentation, fecundity and fluidity. Our history,” he declared, “cannot be the single story of a fixed entity, a state or a clearly designated landscape. We must instead try to follow the many different histories that coexisted within German-speaking central Europe, histories that led Germans towards and away from one another, at once encouraging them to act together and making such common action virtually impossible.”⁴

There is no question that Sheehan was right about the need to accept the great diversity inherent in German-speaking Europe as a starting point for any modern German history. It remains imperative that we take seriously “the many different histories that coexisted there.” There is also no doubt that his emphasis on plurality and difference set Sheehan’s work apart from most of the histories that preceded it, and it is equally clear that his work helped to launch decades of new inquiries into the “diversity, discontinuity, richness, fragmentation, fecundity and fluidity” he identified.

Yet hidden within his goals is also the conceit that there should be a unitary narrative that naturally informed the origins of the nation-state. Once that state was formed, we could finally begin to accept the existence of Germany. Through that process of acceptance, the nation-state came to dominate our definitions of Germany and Germans’ political, social, and cultural identities. As its proponents taught us to subsume older notions of the German nation within the realities of the nation-state, they offered Sheehan and the rest of us a

² James J. Sheehan, *German History 1770–1866* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³ *Ibid.*, 1. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

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set of normalizing rhetorical strategies for taming the many different histories he had acknowledged.

Those strategies channeled and shaped his solutions. The “problem of German identity,” Sheehan explained, “begins with the land itself.” Its variety created fragmented isolation. Before “technology enabled people to break the limits imposed by the natural world,” he went on, “most Germans lived in islands defined by their geographical limits, distinctive in speech and custom, disconnected from any common life.” Consequently, “this geographical diversity” had to be the basis of his “starting-point, not only because it is the setting for the Germans’ histories, but also because it symbolizes the multiplicity of their condition.”⁵

Sheehan’s use of the singular and the plural exposes the limitations of his argument. *The* “German identity” Sheehan evokes is singular; *the* land that must match it is assumed to be a unit; yet both *the* land and *the* Germans remained “a problem” in his story because that land was too fractured and its inhabitants too varied. As a result, its motley mix of peoples remained isolated and diverse in custom and tongue until modern networks of communication, exchange, and travel helped to solve the “problem” by breaking those “limits,” smoothing over the fractures, uniting *the* land, homogenizing *the* people. That process squared Sheehan’s circle and thus solved his conundrum by transforming the land of “Germans’ histories” and their cultural “multiplicities” into a suitable place for the unitary German history that would emerge at the end of his book and with the birth of a nation-state. Until that process was underway, he reminded us, any search for boundaries during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even at the outset of the nineteenth centuries remained “a vexed and contentious enterprise” quite simply because the Germany that ostensibly did not yet exist would not be bound.

Yet Germany did exist long before the German nation-state. Early-modern Germans had been evoking it for centuries and historians of the period have been writing about it ever since. In fact, as a host of scholars have shown us, the idea that there was a Germany filled with Germans thrived unperturbed within the early-modern sea of difference and diversity Sheehan identified.⁶ So too did the belief that these Germans shared a disparate set of commonalities that few people could precisely define and even fewer thought worth the attempt. Moreover, Germany’s unbounded character was only a problem for those who would change it, or those who sought to tame its inhabitants’ diversity after the fact with the nation-state’s teleology: a task nineteenth-century historians

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Most recently see: Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany: A Nation in Its Time before, during, and after Nationalism, 1500–2000* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020).

helping to build up the nation-state pursued with vigor and later passed on to their descendants.

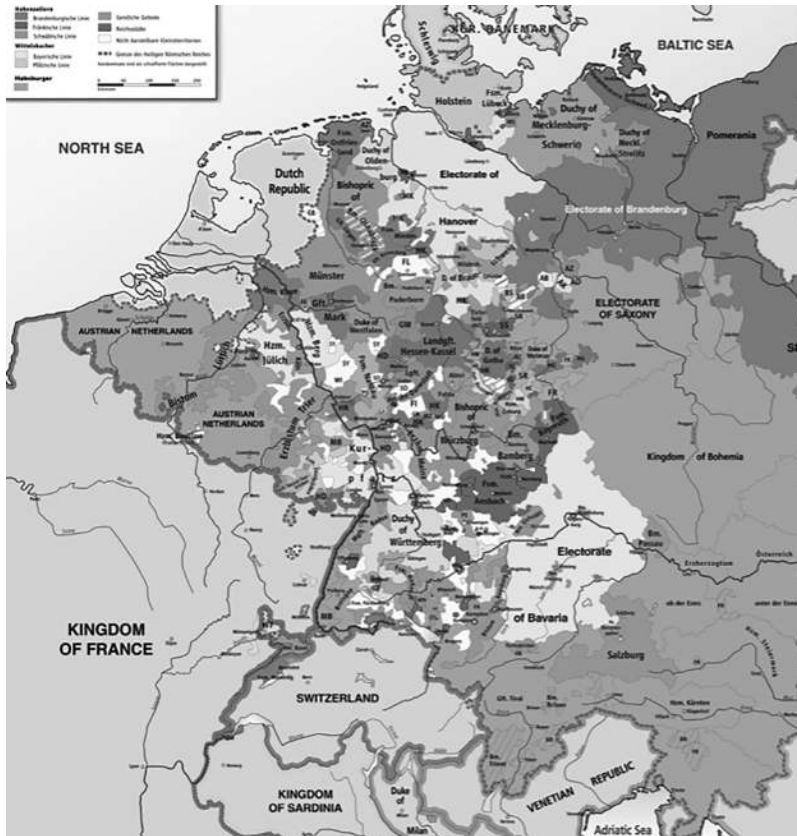
Why else would we regard either the lack of a singular and unique German identity or the absence of a single political state as “problems?” Why else would we seek to write those persistent characteristics out of the history with narratives that focus on how they were overcome? Unless, as I would like to suggest, this aggregate identity based on fluid sets of cultures, customs, languages, and states was only a problem of the modern imagination, dependent as it is on explicit unitary categories that can be systematically studied and easily harnessed for political purposes.

Maps, particularly the kind Helmut Walser Smith used so effectively in his recent exploration of early-modern Germany, are an excellent example.⁷ Sheehan argued that contemporary maps of the era exemplify “the problem” to be solved. They are notorious for their inability to capture either the fluidity of political boundaries or the multiplicity of loyalties and sovereignties within them at any given time. Still, the vast majority of the people who lived in those lands so imperfectly captured by the political maps in our textbooks did so untroubled by the ambiguities that vexed the historians of the German nation-state during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How those people lived with such putative ambiguities has something to teach us about the contours of that unbounded history they experienced in the not-so-distant past (Map I.1).

The maps of the past, in other words, are not a problem: They are part of the solution. They offer us one window into the question of how we might narrate an unbounded German history. During the twentieth century, however, the scholars who were perplexed by the mishmash of states and people the political maps captured so imperfectly turned instead to a small minority of Germans who had set out across centuries to define concrete notions of Germanness. They, more than the maps, seemed to offer these scholars a fitting answer to Sheehan's question: “what is German history?” Consequently, Sheehan too elevated them to heroes in his story, as did the authors of most of the stories of modern German history written over the last two centuries.

From the humanist Johann Stumpf to the prolific Johann Gottfried Herder, Sheehan and others could draw on the writings of men who “tried to find the essence of German nationality in culture rather than geography, in the lives of people rather than in the terrain.”⁸ These were Sheehan's tragic heroes. Their effort to reduce Germanness to a set of precise, quantifiable character traits and linguistic tags remained as futile as it was valiant without the

⁷ Sheehan, *German History 1770–1866*. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.



Map I.1 The standard map of the Holy Roman Empire in 1648
 Source: Creative Commons.

intervention of “some political force – either the state or a popular movement.” Until then, as Sheehan argues in his book, Germany’s “various linguistic borders and islands” would remain “relatively porous and malleable, subject to a variety of cultural, economic, and demographic pressures.” In short, the efforts of these clever men offered historians of the nation-state’s origins a point of departure in their modern tale of German history; they offered them a means for taming the great ambiguity and diversity inherent in the German-speaking lands.

Understanding that point, Sheehan used his own rhetorical strategies to fashion a set of tidy premises: “German history from the middle of the eighteenth century until 1866,” he argued, “must be first of all, the history of the Germans’ various efforts to master their political, social, and cultural worlds, the history of their separate achievements and defeats, institutions and innovations.” At the same time, however, it “must also be the history of the emerging questions about Germany’s collective identity and its future as a national community. Finally,” he added, “it must be the history of the multitude of answers to this question which Germans formulated and sought to act upon.”⁹

Sheehan, of course, was right: *if* we believe that German history before 1866 must be reduced to a history of what happened along the road to making the nation-state. Yet German history could also be written without abandoning the diversity and plurality he identified during the century prior to Imperial Germany’s creation and which subsequent scholars have shown persisted much longer than historians focused on nation-making, nationalism, and the nation-state imagined: or wanted to admit. It could be written with more attention paid to the persistent dexterity and multiple subjectivities of the varied people living in these fractured lands and with far less focus on their roads to ostensible unity.

There are good reasons for paying attention to this diversity and plurality rather than trying to subordinate it to unifying trends. The cultural, political, and social structures that shaped the German-speaking lands of early-modern Europe were quite good at preserving difference and individuality even while providing the parameters for fashioning collectives. We also know that those characteristics persisted right through the history of the nation-state’s rise, its repeated falls, and its re-imaginings. We know as well that “the Germans,” such as they were, never found themselves confined to any one state: not during the modern era any more than during the early-modern period. Germans were spread about, and despite the fractured landscape, frequently on the move.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

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Consequently, as many recent scholars have taken pains to remind us, Germans could be found across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries living in a great number of European nation-states and quite a few empires, not to mention Swiss cantons. In addition, as European empires expanded and new nation-states emerged from them, many of those polities also boasted distinctly German communities. Often, those were tied together by networks of communication, exchange, travel, and trade that informed the attitudes and actions of the Germans in those communities as well as the people they lived among. It makes no sense to cut those millions of Germans out of German history; yet the binding-up of historical narratives around the fate of nation-states has frequently done just that.

Unbinding German history requires its respatialization; it requires as well that we engage a great many more Germans in motion, across Europe and in the world. One effect of that move is integrative: It offers millions of Germans a place and a voice in a history that has both excluded them and marginalized their contributions to the German histories that flowed through the heyday of the nation-state. The intellectual and political stakes, however, are higher than simply re-integrating excluded groups into a more globalized German history. Unbinding German history demonstrates that the diversity and plurality Sheehan identified as inherent to Germanness at the end of the eighteenth century continued to inform many Germans' actions over the course of the last two centuries. That insight should inform our analyses and animate our narratives as well.

It is, in fact, my conviction that German history can and should be written with greater attention to mobility and a greater emphasis on the explanatory power of modes of affiliation, affinity, and belonging. It also should be written with a recognition that an acceptance of difference and hybridity played as much if not more of a role in the lives of most Germans than did exclusionary arguments about unity. If we begin by accepting those positions, by understanding that German history can only ever be regarded as an aggregate of Germans' histories, and by recognizing that a great many of the people who lived these histories did so without regarding difference and unity as antinomies or hybridities as problems, we will be better able to understand the actions of the great variety of people who thought of themselves and were regarded by others as German during the modern era. As a result, we will also be able to gain a better understanding of the roles Germans and German things have played in the history of the modern world. That is what this book's narrative is meant to achieve. To reach those goals, it begins by examining some of the characteristics of medieval and early-modern German history that other historians have deemed problems, but which I regard as solutions.

Polycentrism

Polycentrism characterized late medieval Germany. It also continued to define Germany after 1512, after the Empire began to be commonly referred to in writing as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. No one mandated it. In part, German polycentrism developed out of the landscape that Sheehan observed would remain fractured right into the modern era. More importantly, however, it was a product of German rulers' consistent focus on their individual localities combined with their comfort at maintaining diversity within the Empire's unity. As Len Scales reminds us, while most late medieval Europeans experienced collective bonds "within local and regional spheres, which also provided a starting point for imagining broader identities," "nowhere was this truer than Germany."¹⁰ "The steps taken by rulers elsewhere in Europe to enlarge the territories under the monarchy's direct control and limit or suppress regional autonomies had no real counterparts in Germany." By the same token, if in other European kingdoms "members of the high nobility competed for access and influence at court, the great men in Germany preferred on the whole to attend on the ruler as little as possible, and to concentrate their energies at home, upon consolidating their regional spheres of dominance." In the German lands, Scales explains, it was "not the strong and ambitious but the weak and threatened" who sought out "the proximity of the monarch."¹¹

There also was no natural geographic center to which these late-medieval German rulers might gravitate, such as Paris or Saint-Denis for the French, and thus there was no single location that might serve as a foundation for a collective identity. Yet those German rulers did recognize the emperor, in Aachen, Mainz, or Vienna or wherever he might be, and "late medieval writers persisted in viewing the German lands, despite all the evidence for their divisions and diversity, as constituting a single community of experience under the monarch, all alike thriving under a good ruler and suffering together under an evil or unlucky one." Thus "diffuseness, multiplicity of voices, even regionalism and localism," did not undermine "the development of notions of a larger common past" in German-speaking Europe. Quite the contrary, they proved to be "capable of furnishing resources and stimuli of their own for perceiving such a past."¹²

In many ways, "the delicate balance between unity and diversity" that Scales identifies in the late medieval period and Joachim Whaley has continued to trace through the early-modern era persisted because "the relationship

¹⁰ Len Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity: Authority and Crisis: 1245–1414* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 504.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72–73, 87–88. ¹² *Ibid.*, 190, 352.

between the Empire and the German nation was never clearly defined.” That might surprise modern readers who assume that a state requires such definitions. Yet as Whaley made clear decades ago, “most commentators from the late fifteenth century onwards simply took the existence of some kind of relationship between the two for granted.” People “rarely” sought precise definitions even for encyclopedia entries until sometime after 1750, when “a sustained discussion of the identity and future of the Germans and their culture began,” led largely by those men who played heroic roles in Sheehan’s tale.¹³

Yet even as that debate began to take shape at the end of the eighteenth century, “for most Germans *Vaterland* certainly still meant the region, town or village in which they lived and their primary loyalty was to the local dynasty rather than to the emperor or to any abstract German Nation.” Even among the literary heroes who sought out precise definitions for “Germanness” and the “German nation,” the majority “took a generally positive view of the effects of territorial diversity on German cultural development.” Indeed, Whaley is adamant that even with the radical transformation of the map during and after the French revolutionary wars, “the idea of unity in variety remained as fundamental a principle.”¹⁴

It should not surprise us, then, that historians such as Celia Applegate, who taught us so much about the interconnections between Germans’ understandings of nation and region, would remind us that ethnologists and folklorists during the middle of the nineteenth century, such as Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, consistently thought of Germany as “‘a land and a people at once homogenous and unified and also polymorphic and disparate’.” Thus Riehl, like so many of his generation, believed that “the challenge” of their age “was to preserve the diversity while achieving unity.”¹⁵

We can see Riehl’s conviction governing the actions of people in a number of surprising places. Take, for example, the nineteenth-century archeologists, prehistorians, and the many laymen who supplied them with objects in German-speaking Central Europe, and the town leaders who created institutions for those collections as well. The focus on *Heimat*, or homeland, which Applegate and others brought to our attention in the 1990s, and which begot the *Heimat* associations and *Heimat* museums that one can still find across contemporary Germany, almost always had an element of prehistory to them.

¹³ Joachim Whaley, “Thinking about Germany, 1750–1815: The Birth of a Nation?” *The Publications of the English Goethe Society*, NS Vol. LXVI (1996): 53–71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Celia Applegate, “Music in Place: Perspectives on Art Culture in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in David Blackbourn and James Retallack (eds.) *Localism, Landscape, and the Ambiguities of Place: German-Speaking Central Europe, 1860–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 45.