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### Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation

This is the first translation of Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* for almost 100 years. The series of fourteen speeches, delivered whilst Berlin was under French occupation after Prussia's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Jena in 1806, is widely regarded as a founding document of German nationalism, celebrated and reviled in equal measure. Fichte's account of the distinctiveness of the German people and his belief in the native superiority of its culture helped to shape German national identity throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. With an extensive introduction that puts Fichte's argument in its intellectual and historical context, this edition brings an important and seminal work to a modern readership. All of the usual series features are provided, including notes for further reading and a chronology.

GREGORY MOORE is lecturer in German at the University of St Andrews. He previously taught at the University of Wales Aberystwyth, and was Junior Research fellow at Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge. He is Secretary of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society.

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY  
OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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FICHTE  
*ADDRESSES TO THE GERMAN NATION*

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY  
OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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# FICHTE: ADDRESSES TO THE GERMAN NATION



EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

GREGORY MOORE  
*University of St Andrews*



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Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-0-521-44404-0 — Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation  
 Edited by Gregory Moore  
 Frontmatter  
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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521444040](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521444040)

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First published 2008

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data*

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 1762–1814. [Reden an die deutsche Nation. English]

Fichte : Addresses to the German nation / edited with an introduction and  
 notes by Gregory Moore.

p. cm. — (Cambridge texts in the history of political thought)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-44404-0

1. Germany — Politics and government — 1806-1815. 2. Education and state —  
 Germany. 3. National characteristics, German. I. Moore, Gregory. II. Title.

DD199.F413 2008

320.540943

2008026932

ISBN 978-0-521-44404-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-44873-4 Paperback

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## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Daniel Breazeale for advice in matters of translation, Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss for their helpful comments on the introduction, and Richard Fisher for his forbearance during the protracted gestation of this project.



## Introduction

At noon on Sunday, 13 December 1807, Johann Gottlieb Fichte stood before an expectant audience in the amphitheatre of the Berlin Academy of Sciences and began the first of a series of fourteen weekly lectures known as the *Addresses to the German Nation*. A year before, Prussia, the last German state left standing against Napoleon, had been brought to its knees, its armies routed at the Battle of Jena. As the French advanced unopposed towards Berlin, Fichte fled the city, following the king and his government east to Königsberg. Now, after a Carthaginian peace had stripped Prussia of her rank as a major European power and reduced her to a satellite of the Grand Empire, Fichte returned to the occupied capital, traumatised, yet convinced it was his duty to mobilise a defeated people and urge their spiritual renewal. It was a course of action not without danger. Recalling the fate of Johann Palm, a Nuremberg book-dealer executed by the French for printing a seditious pamphlet, Fichte wrote: ‘I know very well what I risk; I know that a bullet may kill me, like Palm; but it is not this that I fear, and for my cause I would gladly die.’<sup>1</sup> Over the sound of the drums of French troops marching in the streets outside, he began to speak . . .

This story, told and retold throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, has helped win for the *Addresses* a privileged place in histories of nationalism as well as in nationalist histories of Germany. Claimed by liberals and conservatives, socialists and fascists alike, Fichte’s best-known work has come to be seen as a definitive statement of romantic or ‘messianic’ nationalism. Although he may not have been the first

<sup>1</sup> GA III/6, p. 213. (For abbreviations see p. xlv).

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theorist of the nation, or even the first spokesman for the unity of his country, his ideas about the relationship between language and identity, his portrait of the German character and its mission in the world, his vision of education as the means of moral regeneration, would shape German self-understanding for the next 150 years. Yet the *Addresses* owe their influence and reputation not only to *what* Fichte said but *how* he said it. Kant's self-anointed successor and – in his own eyes, to be sure – the leading thinker of the day, he appeared before his audience not merely as a philosopher. Just as he intended, some hailed him as a German Demosthenes, others saw in him a new Luther – ensuring that his words, a mixture of prophetism and polemic, eloquence and abstraction, long echoed in the German cultural imagination, recalled in both victory and defeat. Even if the *Addresses* are, inescapably, a response to a particular moment of historical crisis for a particular people, they yet have a broader significance. For Fichte also appeals, indirectly at least, to all of humanity, whose freedom, he believed, can be realised only by patriotism standing proxy for the idealism so disastrously lacking in the modern world.

## The state of the nation

The very title of Fichte's work is a calculated provocation to his audience. When he delivered the *Addresses*, 'Germany' did not exist as anything more than a vague geographical expression. There was no unitary German state. Nor was it by any means clear – even to the inhabitants of central Europe – whether there was such a thing as a 'German nation'. How would one define its properties? What did it mean to be 'German'? These are the questions that Fichte sets out to answer.

In 1808 'Germany' referred to a collection of forty-one separate territories: Prussia, Austria and the various members of the Confederation of the Rhine, who owed their allegiance, and in some cases their crowns, to France. Even this was a great simplification of the situation prevailing at the close of the eighteenth century, before the revolutionary wars and Napoleon's redrawing of the map of *Mitteleuropa* (greeted, one presumes, with some relief by professional cartographers). Hundreds of duodecimo states, free cities and ecclesiastical possessions were scattered across the landscape in bewildering profusion. Many of these dominions were themselves broken up by a number of internal civil, legal and fiscal boundaries; some were not made up of contiguous pieces, but joined only by their ruler's personal authority; others had to tolerate enclaves of

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autonomous power within their borders. ‘German’ politics was a hopelessly complicated affair with conflicting jurisdictions, uncertain sovereignties and perpetual peacelessness. Holding most, but not all, of these units together, at least in theory, was the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, an entity that traced its ancestry back to the partition of the Carolingian Empire in 843. As Voltaire acidly but truthfully observed, it was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire. Nor, one might add, was it exclusively German. The King of England was a member as Elector of Hanover, the King of Denmark as Duke of Holstein, the King of Sweden as Lord of Pomerania, while Belgium participated as a dependency of the House of Habsburg. The empire included substantial French, Italian and Polish minorities, and many German-speaking communities lived outside its formal frontiers. The ‘nation’ its name referred to was not, then, a homogeneous ethnic group or the common people, but rather the *Adelsnation* or political elite of the *Reich*.

The gravitational pull of the imperial constitution had grown steadily weaker since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the beginning of the internecine struggle between the two largest German powers, Austria and Prussia. In the absence of a strong centralised government, a capital city, or even a single currency, a sense of unity was hard to establish: the Holy Roman Empire was simply too diffuse. But if German political identity was fragile, there were some attempts to foster a *cultural* identity. The first of these was undertaken during the Reformation period. Already humanist scholars, following the rediscovery of Tacitus’ *Germania* (AD 98) in the middle of the fifteenth century, had claimed to find in this idealised portrait of tribal society a catalogue of supposedly ‘Teutonic’ virtues that were still imprinted on the national character many hundreds of years later. Honesty, courage, honour, love of liberty – these were the traits that distinguished the German-speaking peoples even now from the decadent Latin countries (or *die Welschen*, the collective name given to the French and Italians). Martin Luther saw his own struggle against papal power as a continuation of an ancient desire for self-determination: he invoked the Cheruscan chieftain Arminius, who had won a crushing victory at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in AD 9, as a symbol of Germany’s renewed campaign against the corrupting influence of Rome. Just as momentously, Luther’s translation of the Bible laid the foundations of a modern standard variety of German on which a secular public sphere began to build in the eighteenth century. This was essentially a literary culture, composed of readers and writers who were

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joined through an ever-expanding network of publishers, periodicals and lending libraries, reaching beyond territorial and social barriers, linking German speakers from Cologne to Königsberg, the Elbe to the Alps. It was, its champions hoped, the basis for a truly national community, one rooted in indigenous traditions and free from the oft-decried German tendency to ape foreign fashions and taste (*Ausländerei*). But this culture touched only a small minority of central Europeans in the eighteenth century: it was national in aspiration but not in fact. Nevertheless, it marked the emergence of what Friedrich Meinecke would later call the German *Kultur* nation.

Patriotism flourished, but it was of a local variety (*Heimatliebe*; *Schollenpatriotismus*). One's 'fatherland' was not the decrepit and often invisible Empire – which by the eighteenth century was more often than not an object of derision – but the principality or duchy, the city or even rural commune in which one lived. Prussians could and did take pride in the achievements of Frederick the Great, Austrians in their country's hereditary clout and influence, Danzigers in the history of the Hanseatic League. Even so, patriotic allegiances could be transferred without difficulty: Thomas Abbt, Swabian by birth, wrote *On Dying for the Fatherland* (1761) with Prussia in mind. As the novelist Christoph Martin Wieland pointed out in the 1790s, devotion to a larger 'Germany' was difficult to find. 'I see Saxon, Bavarian, Württemberg, and Hamburg patriots,' he wrote, 'but German patriots, who love the entire *Reich* as their fatherland . . . Where are they?'<sup>2</sup>

Widespread provincialism co-existed with the enlightened cosmopolitanism espoused by many of the intellectual class. Excluded from power and responsibility, they felt that they had more in common with reformers and scholars in other lands than with their own countrymen and preferred to regard themselves as citizens of the worldwide republic of letters, an imaginary space where free-thinkers could exchange ideas for the good of humanity. This simultaneously internationalist and parochial outlook could not survive for long in the turmoil of the revolutionary age. The mass mobilisation of a citizen army had defended France against a coalition of foreign troops; but when this unprecedented military force went on the offensive from 1792, it would, by sweeping away the feudal structures of the Holy Roman Empire, reshape

<sup>2</sup> Wieland, 'Über deutschen Patriotismus. Betrachtungen, Fragen und Zweifel', in *Werke*, vol. 3 (Munich: Hanser, 1967), pp. 744–54 [p. 750].

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the German political landscape also. The French revolutionary armies acted as undertaker to the old *Reich* and midwife to German nationalism: the humiliation of defeat and resentment at the treatment of the occupied German lands, first under the Directory and later under Napoleon, fostered a new solidarity rooted in shared suffering and adversity. Of even greater importance was a shift in the meaning of the term ‘nation’ itself, most obviously and consequentially under the influence of Johann Gottfried Herder. Where Karl Eugen, Duke of Württemberg, had once echoed Louis XIV when he contemptuously declared ‘I am the fatherland’, Herder viewed the nation as co-extensive with the people or *Volk*, the totality of a given cultural and ethnic community and not merely the privileged members of the *Adelsnation*.<sup>3</sup> The *Volksnation*, the German answer to the civic nation of the French, was increasingly seen to have an identity distinct from feudal or state institutions. And it is this *Nation*, the German people as a whole, to which Fichte’s *Addresses* are directed.

## The philosophy of freedom

Fichte’s own ‘dearly beloved’ fatherland was Saxony.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1762, the son of a lowly though literate weaver, he was rescued from a life of provincial obscurity by an aristocratic patron eager to fund the education of so precociously gifted a child. After leaving Pforta, the same boarding school that would later produce Nietzsche, Fichte studied theology with the aim of becoming a pastor – a well-trodden path for talented but unmonied children of the *Reich*. Kant, Herder, Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel all travelled the same road. Forced by his straitened circumstances to leave university without graduating, Fichte, like so many of his colleagues, earned his crust while waiting for a pastorate by working as a private tutor to various wealthy families in the furthest-flung corners of the German-speaking world. Such tutors were treated as little more than indentured servants, though they were expected to possess the social graces necessary to cultivate gentlemen, and the humiliation of this experience instilled in Fichte a lasting distaste for lackeydom and the frivolity of the *beau monde*.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Whaley, ‘Reich, Nation, Volk. Early Modern Perspectives’, *Modern Language Review*, 101 (2006), 442–55.

<sup>4</sup> *GA* 111/1, p. 385.

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Fichte's material hardship during these years was compounded by a spiritual crisis. He found himself reluctantly persuaded by the determinism then fashionable in Germany, and associated with Spinoza and certain thinkers of the French Enlightenment: the idea that human beings were not exempt from the laws of the physical universe; that their desires, actions and thoughts could be explained as necessary consequences of physiological, psychological or environmental factors. Though compelling, such a position was deeply troubling, especially for someone preparing to dedicate his life to the Church, for it seemed to leave no scope for agency or choice. Fichte found a way out of this impasse when he stumbled on Kant in 1790. Kant's reconciliation of freedom and determinism, his bifocal view of man as having both an empirical self subject to natural causation and a transcendental self that enjoyed untrammelled moral autonomy, led Fichte to experience, as he put it, a 'revolution' in his thinking.<sup>5</sup> He had found a new vocation.

He began by anonymously publishing an essay so thoroughly Kantian that it was widely assumed to have been written by Kant himself (*Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, 1792), but from the first Fichte was chiefly preoccupied by the critical philosophy's political and moral implications as well as its metaphysical significance. In 1793 he issued two works occasioned by the recent upheavals in France: a brief pamphlet entitled *Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe Who Have Oppressed it Until Now* and the longer and unfinished *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution*. Fichte was not alone among German writers and intellectuals in welcoming the outbreak of revolution in France. Unusual, though, was his devotion to the cause even at a point when the Revolution had begun to devour its children and when many of his initially sympathetic compatriots – including Klopstock and Schiller, who had been made citizens of the Republic in 1792 – had turned away in fear and disgust. Choosing this moment to enter an impassioned and eloquent plea on behalf of the Revolution and to elucidate its underlying theoretical premises would earn him a reputation as a German Jacobin and trouble-maker.

'We carry our charter of freedom, given and sealed by God, deep in our bosom', Fichte declared in *Contribution*.<sup>6</sup> No external authority can bind the individual save that to which he freely gives his consent in a

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 190.    <sup>6</sup> GA I/1, p. 266.

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contractual arrangement with others: he is beholden only to the Kantian moral law within him. This absolute autonomy – our freedom of will, which releases us from the necessity of the natural world; our freedom of thought, which raises us above the mechanical association of ideas in animals – is expressed in and through certain inalienable rights: our right to say and think and do whatever we want, so long as it is in accord with our conscience; those rights whose abolition would infringe on the principle of moral self-sufficiency and human dignity. It is these rights that absolutist regimes seek to suppress: in imposing their arbitrary will on others, tyrants rob their subjects of their freedom and thus of their very humanity. And it is in defence of these rights, Fichte concludes, going where Kant had feared to tread, that a citizen is empowered to terminate his contract with the state; that revolution is then always justified, indeed a duty. For a people can never abdicate its right to liberty and self-realisation.

The same cause of freedom that moved him to champion the French Revolution later stirred his patriotic appeals for German unity. It also inspired his philosophy proper. Called to the University of Jena on the strength of his reputation as a leading interpreter of Kant, he set to work overthrowing orthodoxies old and new. Fichte once famously claimed that it was while writing about the Revolution that he received the ‘first hints and intimations’ of his principal work: the *Wissenschaftslehre* (*The Science of Knowledge*), which he originally published in 1794 but continued to revise until his death in 1814. A highly abstract inquiry into the source, limits and objects of human knowledge, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is an attempt to go beyond the compromises of Kant’s epistemological dualism and ultimately to reconceive the nature of philosophy itself.

Fichte had come to appreciate that any account of knowledge that allowed it to be conditioned by entities external to the mind was an obstacle to the complete vindication of human autonomy. For Fichte, only a philosophy that started from the spontaneously self-positing I as the ground of all possible experience was entitled to call itself the ‘first system of freedom’, which led him to claim of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: ‘Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves.’<sup>7</sup> Hence there were two ways of looking at matters, according to Fichte. Either one subscribes to ‘idealism’ or to

<sup>7</sup> *GA* III/2, p. 298; *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 385–6.

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‘dogmatism’. Either one sees the world as contingent on the mind and thus under the sway of the moral will and adaptable to its ends, or one does not. Either one is deeply convinced of the reality of human freedom and resolved to preserve that freedom in all that one undertakes, or one is not. Thus, the kind of philosophy one chooses ‘depends on what kind of person one is’,<sup>8</sup> and has a profoundly practical significance. The idea of being a mere appendage of nature, acted upon rather than acting and forever governed by forces beyond one’s control, possessed a certain allure for many who were by no means averse to regarding themselves as helpless, passive objects rather than as self-determining subjects. Fichte suggests that there is perversity or cowardice or simple laziness in upholding such a view: it encourages supineness, the abdication of responsibility for one’s own affairs and those of others, and the view that the status quo is unalterable. The conviction of man’s transcendental freedom, however, produces sovereign individuals and gives them the strength to win their political liberty too. This opposition between the idealist and dogmatic philosophical standpoints Fichte would later reformulate in the *Addresses* as the difference between German and ‘foreign’ modes of thought.

## Philosophy and the public sphere

‘I wish not merely to think, but to act’, Fichte told his fiancée in 1790.<sup>9</sup> Those words, written when he was an obscure and penniless private tutor on the geographical and social margins of the German-speaking world, point already to his long-held ambition to close the gap between philosophy and everyday life that had opened up through the professionalisation of the discipline in eighteenth-century Germany. During the period from 1794 to 1799, when he held the chair of philosophy at the University of Jena, Fichte searched for ways to reach beyond the academy and influence a broader public sphere. This required first and foremost a recasting of the role of the scholar in society, a role that would not be limited to the purely scientific or theoretical realm. More than any other group the scholarly class had a duty to the commonwealth: they were a vanguard elite that determined the evolution of culture, supervising and co-ordinating humanity’s progress towards perfection,

<sup>8</sup> *GA* 1/4, p. 195.    <sup>9</sup> *GA* 111/1, p. 72.



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ever seeking new means to develop its potential. Consequently, Fichte was adamant that the philosopher must apply his insights to the actual events and problems of his own age.

These were not empty words for Fichte: he practised what he preached. In the *Foundation of Natural Right* (1796/7) he showed that even as forbiddingly abstruse a work as the *Wissenschaftslehre* could serve as a basis for a theory of human rights and international law. He repeated the trick for morality in his *System of Ethics* (1798). Though he drifted away from the uncompromising individualism expressed in his writings on the French Revolution, his demands for political reform were no less radical or utopian: in *The Closed Commercial State* (1800) he argued for an early variant of *dirigiste* socialism. Most importantly and characteristically, whilst at Jena he began to lecture not only to his students and colleagues but to a wider audience as well. Forced to resign his chair at Jena after charges of atheism were brought against him, he was granted permission to settle in Berlin where, lacking an institutional base, he repackaged the *Wissenschaftslehre* in a ‘popular’ form that could be understood by educated laymen. Hence most of his major works after 1800 – *The Vocation of Man* (1800), *The Characteristics of the Present Age* (1804) and *The Way Towards the Blessed Life* (1806) – were originally delivered as public talks. By all accounts an inspirational speaker, equally at home behind the pulpit and the lectern, Fichte was suspicious of the written word and the power of the new literary market place to debase the discourse of civil society. If reading was, as he believed it to be, an essentially passive and solitary occupation that failed to stimulate independent thought, then he would revive the rhetorical character of ancient Greek philosophy; his oratory was designed to engage both the heart and the mind, to persuade his listeners as well as to move them to action.

When war broke out against France in 1806, Fichte offered his services first as a tribune, then as chaplain with the Prussian troops, promising to elucidate the deeper meaning of the battle and speak ‘swords and lightning bolts’;<sup>10</sup> he outlined his ‘Addresses to German Warriors’ only for the government to turn him down. When hostilities resumed in 1813 he again approached the authorities with a similar proposal; after being politely refused once more he joined the newly levied militia (*Landwehr*). In this sense at least, the *Addresses to the German Nation* do not represent a departure from Fichte’s usual procedure: they are, rather, only the most

<sup>10</sup> GA II/10, p. 80.

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conspicuous example of his attempts to shape national life, indeed to bring a truly national life into being for the first time.

### Rebirth of a nation

Fichte begins his *Addresses* by announcing that he intends to view recent events within the framework of the philosophical eschatology he had outlined in *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, a series of seventeen lectures delivered three years previously. There he asserted that the human race is governed by the unfolding of a providential ‘world-plan’ that prescribes advancement towards ever greater freedom and rationality. From this premise he deduced five necessary epochs in history, sketching a kind of pilgrim’s progress of Reason, a five-act drama that coincides with the five stages of Christian theology, stations on man’s circuitous journey from a paradise unearned to a paradise regained.<sup>11</sup> The first era was a period of noble savagery (‘the State of Innocence’), followed by an age of absolutism predicated on unconditional obedience to authority (‘the State of Progressive Sin’); the third, the present age, was characterised by arid intellectualism, empty freedom and unrestrained licentiousness (‘the State of Completed Sinfulness’); the fourth embraced truth as the highest of all things (the ‘State of Progressive Justification’); and, having now apprehended the laws of Reason, in the fifth and final phase (‘the State of Completed Justification and Sanctification’) humanity would begin consciously and freely to build a social order based on these foundations, ‘until the Race become a perfect image of its everlasting archetype in Reason; – and then shall the purpose of this Earthly Life be attained, its end become apparent, and Mankind enter upon the higher spheres of Eternity’.<sup>12</sup> The *Addresses* are explicitly advertised as a sequel to this earlier work and signal from the outset Fichte’s determination to see the French invasion not only as a moment of national crisis for ‘Germany’, but also as a seismic shift of universal significance.

Prussia’s collapse seemed to confirm Fichte’s diagnosis of the present age as one of complete sinfulness. The Germans had brought moral and military catastrophe on themselves because they – the population as a

<sup>11</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> *CPA*, p. 9.

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whole and not just the rulers – had suicidally developed their complacent materialism to its utmost degree, thereby allowing this ‘realm of selfishness’ to be swept away by Napoleon’s all-conquering armies. The collapse of the old regime had brought the third epoch of history to an abrupt and (Fichte admits with untypical modesty) completely unforeseen close. Having exhausted its capacity for decadence, Germany stood, abased and defeated, on the threshold of a new era. But in order to cross over, it would have to be born again – undergoing not only political but spiritual renewal. It must recognise its helplessly corrupt state, cast off its old divided self and fashion a new identity: ‘we must become on the spot what we ought to be in any case, Germans’.<sup>13</sup>

How does one become German? This requires an act of the imagination. As Fichte well knew, he was addressing a German nation that did not yet exist: his actual audience in Berlin was a small and unrepresentative group of the Prussian educated elite. In other words, his discourses are proleptic: his aim was to paint a picture of German identity, to present a vision of what Germans have been, are and yet might be, so that his listeners might transform themselves into the model citizens of his fancy. They would prove their Germanness by refusing, like Fichte, to acknowledge regional and class differences, by demonstrating the unity which he evoked and claimed to be already existing (at least latently), by having the courage to act.

Crucially, though, Fichte does not stop there. It is not the fate of Germany alone that hangs in the balance. By enacting their nationhood, by awakening to the potential that lies therein, the Germans will redeem not only themselves but the whole world, leading the way into the next epoch of history. The German nation will be pioneers of a truly rational social order. ‘If you sink,’ Fichte accordingly warns at the end of his Fourteenth Address, ‘all humanity sinks with you.’ This messianic zeal seems at first sight a long way from his earlier defence of the French Revolution. But on closer inspection it is not. We have already seen that Fichte clung to his hopes in France for much longer than many of his compatriots. As late as 1799 he could write: ‘It is clear that from now on only the French Republic can be the fatherland of the man of integrity, that only to it can he devote his energies; for from now on not only the dearest hopes of humanity but even its existence depend upon its

<sup>13</sup> See below, p. 155.

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victory.<sup>14</sup> Later that same year he even welcomed the prospect of French intervention in German politics. What changed? Not Fichte – he remained faithful to the ideas of 1789. He did not turn his back on the Revolution; the French did. The key to his thinking can be found in an illuminating passage from *The Characteristics of the Present Age*: the ‘fatherland of the really educated Christian European’ is ‘in each age that European state which leads in culture’. But what if the ‘sun-loving spirit’ had forsaken France because ‘light and justice’ were no longer at home there?<sup>15</sup> And they weren’t. The Republic, on whose behalf Fichte had once pledged to work, had given way to a sham monarchy bent on conquest for its own sake. Accordingly, he formed a quite visceral hatred of Napoleon, the man who had betrayed the cause, and whom, refusing to recognise his imperial dignity, he insisted on calling ‘the nameless one’: Fichte certainly did not share Hegel’s admiration of the self-crowned Emperor. To his mind, the French had ultimately shown themselves to be unworthy of their appointed role in spreading the evangel of freedom. Perhaps it was now once again the turn of the Germans; perhaps they, the descendants of Arminius and Luther, could succeed where the French had failed and bring the Revolution to completion.

Nor did Fichte see his conversion to the cause of German patriotism as a disavowal of the cosmopolitan principles espoused in his earlier writings. His nationalism – unlike that of later pan-Germans – ultimately rested on the confidence that love of fatherland need not be narrow, selfish and particular, but was compatible with a wider devotion to humanity, which otherwise would remain a bloodless abstraction. This notion is first expressed in *Philosophy of Freemasonry* (1802) and again in *Patriotism and its Opposite*, a dialogue written in 1806, just before the Battle of Jena. There Fichte observes that, if cosmopolitanism is ‘the will that the purpose of life and of man be reached in all humanity’, then patriotism is ‘the will that this purpose be reached first of all in that nation whereof we are members’.<sup>16</sup> But here is the typically Fichtean twist: because the goal of humanity can be advanced only by ‘science’, and only the Germans have begun to possess such science (through Fichte’s own *Wissenschaftslehre*), only Germans while serving their country can simultaneously work for humanity as a whole.

<sup>14</sup> *GA* III/3, p. 349.    <sup>15</sup> *CPA*, p. 240.    <sup>16</sup> *GA* II/9, p. 399.

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The idea of a people's calling or election is as old as nationalism itself. English Puritans in the seventeenth century reckoned themselves the vessels of divine grace and the Commonwealth a new Jerusalem. The westward expansion of the United States was enshrined in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The French revolutionaries likewise believed, especially after 1792, that it had fallen to them to liberate not just the *patrie* but the whole earth by exporting their ideals abroad. For Fichte, though, the special task of the Germans will not be accomplished by victory on the battlefield. The war of arms is over, he tells his audience; now begins the war of principles, morals, character, a war to end all wars: 'Yours is the greater destiny, to found the empire of spirit and reason, and to annihilate completely the crude physical force that rules the world.' This was a campaign which, with the heavy artillery of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Germany was well equipped to win.

Even Fichte's conviction that Germany had a mission, one overwhelmingly spiritual in nature, was neither new nor uncommon amongst the German intelligentsia in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> It served as a point around which the concept of the nation could crystallise, giving meaning to a specifically German identity for the first time. But it also served as wish fulfilment in an age when the country's fate was in the hands of foreign powers. Indeed, Germany's very impotence in the absence of a unified state was seen as a virtue: by remaining aloof from international politics, the German people had shown themselves, in Hölderlin's words, 'poor in deeds but rich in thought' – something that seemed to be borne out by the extraordinary efflorescence of German literature and philosophy at the close of the eighteenth century. Schiller spoke of his compatriots' peculiar moral grandeur: their lot was not 'to triumph with the sword' but to be a storehouse of civilisation and knowledge; as the Germans found themselves at the geographical centre of Europe, so they were 'the heart of humanity'. And while every nation had its day on the stage of history, 'the day of the German is the harvest of all Time'. Yet though Fichte was by no means the first to expound Germany's manifest destiny of the spirit, no one, to be sure, articulated this creed as forcefully, systematically and eloquently as he did.

<sup>17</sup> See Aira Kemiläinen, *Auffassungen über die Sendung des deutschen Volkes um die Wende des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1956).

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Language and the inner frontier

The basis of German uniqueness, Fichte claims, is language. As he freely admits, this was hardly a novel insight. Language and identity had long been linked in the German historical imagination. This was unsurprising, given that the German tongue was the one thing that united a population divided by religion, politics and class: a fact already recognised in the eleventh-century *Annolied*. Ever since the Thirty Years War, scholars and writers such as Opitz, Thomasius, Leibniz, Gottsched and Campe had laboured to build the cultural nation from the ground up by reforming the vernacular, increasing its expressive potential, and asserting it against Latin in the universities and French in the salons. Moreover, Herder had recently argued that language was the pre-eminent vehicle of the national spirit (*Volksgeist*), a theory apparently supported by Schlegel's pioneering researches into the relationship between Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. For Fichte, language constitutes what he calls the inner frontier, the original and 'truly natural' borders of nations, often ignoring and cutting across the recognised limits of existing states. The dotted lines separating Prussia from Saxony on a map were accidental, ever-changing, merely political. Similarly, the Rhine could be bridged; but the linguistic boundaries separating the Germans from the French were absolute, eternal and impermeable.

What is language? Fichte rejects the dominant Enlightenment view of language as an entirely arbitrary system of signs. Words are not conventional tokens; Fichte holds that a fundamental law governs why a particular sound and no other represents an object or idea in language, for the latter is an elemental force, the spontaneous eruption of human nature. All languages are therefore varieties of a hypothetical protolanguage, which, under the pressure of assorted external influences on the organs of speech, was diverted down particular phonetic and lexical paths. As the primordial tongue split off into different groups, so too did humanity: with new dialects nations are formed. A people, then, is a linguistic community, one that continues to speak and develop, to preserve and expand the language it has inherited from the previous generation. Even though after some centuries have passed a group can no longer understand the idiom of their ancestors (as modern Germans can no longer easily understand medieval German), their language remains

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fundamentally the same, because at any one time its speakers have never ceased to understand one another.

In all languages words are first coined to describe the physical world. But the time comes in a people's intellectual growth when it must reach beyond the mundane and attempt to grasp what is inherently intangible: the realm of abstract thought. Concepts can therefore be represented only indirectly, by means of a symbol (*Sinnbild*), a metaphorical equation of the sensuous and the supersensuous. The very word 'idea', Fichte explains, illustrates how this operation works: the Greek *eidōs* originally designated an object of sight. An idea, then, is something we 'see' in our mind's eye. That is to say, the meanings of a language's conceptual vocabulary are all ultimately embedded in concrete experience. Since different linguistic communities have different ways of understanding and describing the sensible world, indeed since the horizons of that lived world are different for each people, one language's metaphor, let alone its entire symbolic system, will not always be comprehensible to speakers of another. Language is hence rooted in its native culture (to use the organic imagery that Fichte himself favours); it cannot be transplanted into foreign soil. In the end, Fichte is interested in language less as a means of describing reality than as the medium of a specific 'national imagination', of the outlook, manners and values particular to a subgroup of humanity, which accompanies even the individual's attempts at self-expression 'into the inmost recesses of his mind as he thinks and wills'.<sup>18</sup>

Fichte does not stop at saying that Germans constitute a nation by virtue of their language and the distinctive mentality manifested therein. He goes further: the Germans *alone* among modern Europeans have preserved their linguistic and cultural identity throughout history; German *alone* is an 'original language', one that has been continuously spoken over countless millennia, never becoming fossilised but always diversifying. Fichte's argument here rests on the assumption that all (Western) European peoples are descendants of the various ancient Teutonic tribes. While the forebears of the Germans remained in their homeland, the Franks, Goths, Burgundians, Langobardi and so on migrated into Roman territory, conquered the local population but, crucially, became assimilated to its culture and gave up their mother tongue. The language they adopted, Latin, was a superficial and artificial

<sup>18</sup> See below, pp. 56, 58.

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acquisition, because they inherited a semantic universe that was irreducibly foreign to their own experience. Latin may have gradually metamorphosed into French, Spanish and Italian, but whatever the conquerors added was grafted on to an idiom that was closed to them. Hence the Romance languages, their glittering appearance notwithstanding, are dead at the root: they have been cut off from the stream of life.

German, by contrast, like Greek before it, has developed without interruption from the origin of language as a natural force; it is a dialect, no matter how distantly related, of the Adamic vernacular. Only in German does the evolutionary chain of sensible and super-sensible signification appear transparent and necessary, because every word corresponds to the people's own observations and nothing is of foreign provenance – a comically myopic claim given the importance of such Latin-derived terms as *Vaterland* (a calque on *patria*), *Nation* and even *Germane* to Fichte's argument.<sup>19</sup> Only in German are the resources for poetic invention and philosophical inquiry constantly being renewed and enriched. Only the Germans, therefore, have the right to call themselves a people – an entity that Fichte understands first and foremost as characterised by its discursive practice, formed by an unbroken series of inherently democratic communicative acts. The deracinated French are not a true nation because they have lost their language and their soul; they are foreigners because they have become estranged not only from the Germans but from themselves. They have no identity.

Once again: a dead language means that a culture is dead. And a dead culture is, ultimately, how Fichte defines 'foreign' – or everything that is antithetical to a German identity. Perhaps 'identity' is the wrong word: what makes the Germans German is the same dynamism, an openness to change, that distinguishes their language. Foreignness and Germanness are not, at least in the first instance, ethnic categories: present-day Germans, Fichte is at pains to point out, have by no means a nobler pedigree than other branches of the Teutonic family tree. These terms describe not descent, but a moral attitude, a world view. To be un-German means, at bottom, to believe that all is fixed, final and settled

<sup>19</sup> David Martyn, 'Borrowed Fatherland: Nationalism and Language Purism in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*', *Germanic Review* 72 (1997), 303–15.



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without the prospect of change – a perspective imposed by the constraints of one's lifeless language. This way of looking at things – that is, frivolously, derivatively, superficially – can influence every form of discourse, from science to politics and history. For example, Fichte rails against the dominant 'foreign' (or 'dogmatic') philosophy of materialism, which reduces the universe to clumps of atoms acted on mechanically by the forces of Newtonian physics: a vision of a dead and barren nature that merely resides in equally dead and barren minds. German (or 'idealist') philosophy apprehends life in its restless flux and variety, going beyond mere appearance to open up vistas of infinite possibility. A true German cannot perceive reality in any other fashion (contemporary 'Germans' who do not – Schelling, for instance – have been infected with the foreign spirit); indeed, the German language is uniquely able to grasp the slipperiness of Being: and it is no coincidence that the *Wissenschaftslehre* was written in German. Whereas foreign societies grind down their masses in the clockwork apparatus of the modern bureaucratic state, a German polity obtains its legitimacy from the people, and would seek to beget both patriotic citizens and proud human beings. Foreigners see the development of the race as locked in an endless cycle of rising and falling civilisations; but the German makes history, not merely repeating what has been and gone before, but producing something entirely new and without precedent. In short, to be German means to be capable of spiritual freedom, a freedom that is guaranteed by the purity of one's language. And this division between the free and unfree, the German and the foreign, is the deepest fault-line cleaving Europe in two.

## Heaven on earth

A people is not just a group that shares a language spoken continuously since its first emergence. Fichte insists that the nation is a given manifestation of the divine, of the realm of pure thought, of original life. It is the totality of that group's spiritual being, the repository of innumerable individual and collaborative acts of creation that shape and reshape it constantly, a body politic and a soul politic, a self-generating and self-perpetuating culture that, in the minds of its members, dwells simultaneously in the past, present and future. As such, the nation, like religion, answers a basic human need: the desire for transcendence, for eternity, the impulse to leave behind some trace