Introduction: German questions

Long journey

When Heinrich August Winkler celebrated his seventieth birthday in December 2008, the occasion was prominently marked in the German quality press. Public honours seemed only fitting. Had not the distinguished chronicler of modern Germany (the Treitschke of the Berlin Republic, teased *Die Welt*) traced the final and wholesome resolution of the German question itself? Winkler's epic German history, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, which had appeared in two volumes eight years before, was a 'Geschichte mit Happy End': in consequence of the events of 1989–90 'the specifically German element' in history had receded.[1] Since that epochal moment, the problems facing Germany had become merely those which faced all advanced democracies. The time seemed ripe for bold historical judgements. The normalisation of Germany, and specifically German nationhood, stood out as one of the principal European attainments of the early twenty-first century. Winkler's message appeared to find warm popular affirmation in the black-red-gold *Partyotismus* of the 2006 football World Cup on German soil. Germans, secure within their reassuringly 'post-classical' nation state, could now at last enjoy being German without any need for their neighbours to quake in their boots.[2] Or as an English commentator would put it, in a darker mood for more uncertain times at the decade's end, Europe's erstwhile scourges had settled down to become citizens of Greater Switzerland.[3] The German *Sonderweg*, as Winkler had argued, was at an end.[4]

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[1] *Die Welt*, 8 December 2008; *Die Zeit*, 19 December 2008. Winkler, *Der lange Weg*, 2 vols.

[2] For post-1990 Germany as a 'post-classical' nation state, see Winkler, *Germany*, vol. I, p. 2.

[3] T. Garton Ash in *The Guardian*, 30 September 2009.

[4] Winkler, *Germany*, vol. II, p. 588.

The closing of historical questions calls attention to their purported origins. Winkler, like so many before him, embarked on his long German journey in the Middle Ages. Likewise hallowed by long tradition was his identification of the Holy Roman Empire as the factor which in Germany had thwarted the nation-state-making processes traceable in the western kingdoms of England and France.[5] One of Winkler's missing components – a 'state' to compare with the western monarchies – does indeed seem lacking in Germany, where the processes of institutionalisation and centralisation already visible in the western realms by the thirteenth century had made little comparable progress.[6] What, though, of the German 'nation'?

According to some influential views, looking for nations anywhere in Europe in the Middle Ages, or for a long time thereafter, is a fool's errand. Nations as they are known to the modern world, nations justified by systematic and hegemonic ideology (national*ism*), nations as platforms for mass mobilisation and motors of political change: these are rarely or never to be found in Europe before the onset of industrialisation.[7] But modern nations, others would insist, are not the only nations. Medievalists have long pointed to abundant evidence to show that medieval Europeans were already conceiving of their world as divided into ethnic groups which were also units of politics – and investing their own with sentiments of affection and loyalty. That the social base of these medieval nations was markedly smaller than their modern successors is undeniably true, but, many would contend, that fact need not invalidate their study. The beliefs of relatively small groups can matter too.[8] And in any case, particularly by the later Middle Ages, the public for ideas invoking common allegiance and ethnicity may well have been larger and more socially diverse than often supposed.[9] From Ireland to Poland, from Iceland to Iberia, therefore, medievalists continue to study peoples and nations and to insist on their historical importance. Indeed, by the start of the twenty-first century the study

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[5] Ibid., vol. I, p. 4. The argument has a distinguished pedigree, rooted in the patriotic medievalism of the nineteenth century (below, Ch. 1, pp. 19–25). Modern scholars who have sought to revive it include Pleßner, *Die verspätete Nation*, pp. 52–64, and Elias, *The Germans*, esp. pp. 317–21. Winkler's ascription of such a central explanatory role to the *Reichsidee* has not escaped criticism: see the review by J.J. Sheehan in *German History* 19 (2001), pp. 619–21.

[6] Medieval 'state-building' and its modern historiography are discussed below, Ch. 2.

[7] For the contending historiographies of the nation, see below, Ch. 1, pp. 40–50; for the eighteenth century as turning point, Smith, 'National identities', p. 37.

[8] Argued in H. Münkler, 'Einleitung', in Münkler, Grünberger and Mayer, *Nationenbildung*, p. 27.

[9] For the communicating of nations, medieval and post-medieval, and the extent of their publics, see below, Ch. 3, pp. 98–9.

of pre-modern nationhood had attained an unprecedented scholarly vogue.[10]

German medievalists were once avid in pursuit of the origins of their own people; indeed, in the study of medieval peoples and nations, Germans were pioneers.[11] Much more commonly, however, German scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries simply took as axiomatic the existence of a 'national' spirit infusing the thought and feelings and motivating the actions of their remote forebears. A nationalistic *Deutsches Mittelalter* was conjured into being, to serve contemporary national ends. At its heart was placed the ('German') *Kaiserzeit*: the long age of imperial glory and intermittent and mounting tragedy which began with the accession of the Ottonian dynasty in the tenth century and ended in the thirteenth with the downfall of the Hohenstaufen. This deeply politicised vision of a German past at once glorious and portentous was swept away by the cataclysm of 1945.[12] A further consequence of that event, however, was to cast a lingering shadow of unease over the study of pre-modern German nationhood as such.[13] While never altogether abandoned, the subject became increasingly unfashionable in the post-war era. On one central issue, moreover, a consensus now emerged: any medieval 'German nation' which may have existed was of an altogether more limited, precarious and problematic character than those to be found among the Germans' neighbours, particularly in the west. Here, it now seemed clear, was no space for ethnocentric boasting, medieval or contemporary, but for a sober recognition of things unachieved. German nationhood was set back in the Middle Ages; hence Winkler's long road to its ultimate attainment.

This book adopts a perspective different both from the German-nationalist scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and from the generally negative visions of more recent studies. It argues that the evidence for the emergence of ideas of common German identity in the Middle Ages, while in some respects different in character from what is found in other European realms, is not obviously less substantial. It also contends, however, that references to the existence of a single German people, to its purported character and defining features, its

[10] The range of themes and approaches is surveyed in Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Peoples*.
[11] Fully discussed below, Ch. 1, pp. 16–25.
[12] Its character and obliteration are traced by Althoff, 'Das Mittelalterbild'. A language of celebratory and unreflective *Deutschtum* nevertheless long outlasted the war among survivors of the older generation: Moraw, 'Kontinuität', pp. 131–2.
[13] Discernible, e.g., in the comments of Johanek, 'Zu neuen Ufern?', pp. 146–8, 152, discussing the Marburg *Nationes* project, and its links with earlier German themes and approaches.

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history, political affairs and relationships with other peoples, all multi-
ply in the period after the *ending* of the medieval *Kaiserzeit*. It was in the
troubled period which commenced with the fall of the Hohenstaufen
that inhabitants of the broad territories of German speech in north-
ern continental Europe began, in growing numbers and with grow-
ing conviction, to perceive themselves *as* German. Now, when some
(if still only a small minority) contemplated the state of the imperial
monarchy, the events of their time, or their own environment or experi-
ences, their conceptual vocabulary and standards of judgement were
increasingly ethnic ones. Between the thirteenth and the fifteenth cen-
turies Germans – or rather, we must keep on saying, some Germans,
under some circumstances – discovered increasingly complex, varied
and meaningful ways of *being* German. What they came to believe
about themselves (and about their neighbours) and the conclusions
which they drew from such beliefs were to become matters of much
significance and controversy in the age of humanism and reform at the
end of the Middle Ages.

The bounds of the present book are set by the deposition of the
Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II by an ecclesiastical assembly at
Lyon in 1245 and by the opening of the Council of Constance in 1414,
under imperial auspices, to heal a schismatic Church. Much of the
thematic unity of the intervening period comes from the troubles and
periodic crises which faced the imperial monarchy: its divisions, its pre-
cipitate changes of ruler and shifts in geographical focus, its dwindling
revenues and resources, and its failure to develop durable institutions.
Not least among the apparent paradoxes of the period is therefore that,
while it begins with an emperor's condemnation at an ecclesiastical
council under the pope, it ends with the ruler of the Empire sitting
enthroned in church as arrangements are made to set aside contending
pontiffs.[14] As we shall see, even (or especially) in crisis, the imperial
monarchy is rich in seeming paradoxes. However, it will also be neces-
sary fairly regularly to step beyond the book's terminal dates, looking
both forward and, particularly, backward. Assessing the role of an insti-
tution which claimed the heritage of the Roman Caesars cannot set off
from a standing start in the time of the last Staufer. Examining social
and cultural developments in and beyond the German lands will also
demand at times a wider chronological stage.

[14] For the role of Sigismund of Luxemburg at Constance, see below, Ch. 5, p. 228. In
what follows, 'Empire', when capitalised and without a proper adjective, refers always
to the medieval western Empire.

Very seldom has German scholarship looked closely at the development of German identity between the end of the Staufer and the time of the Councils. The most salient studies in the field date from the 1930s.[15] Even the great upsurge of interest in the late Middle Ages which took place in the German universities in the closing decades of the twentieth century was directed overwhelmingly at different themes and questions.[16] This is the first book-length study of its subject in any language. Yet the proliferation of a sense of shared Germanness in a period thus marked by crises of monarchy and political decentralisation is a phenomenon which calls out for explanation. The course of medieval European nation-making, after all, continues to be understood as marching in step with the growth of royal bureaucracies and the extension of the theoretical claims and material powers of their monarchical heads: with early 'states' come the first 'nations'. To trace the development of ideas of common peoplehood in lands where monarchical power was small, and its institutionalised rule limited or even contracting, is thus to place in question a key element in dominant accounts of European modernisation. Other studies have already proposed a partial decoupling of the pre-modern nation from emergent state structures.[17] The present book, however, goes further, arguing for the formative role of crisis, doubt, insecurity and perceived decline as early nation-making elements.[18]

It will therefore be important above all to determine how much substance ideas of common German identity actually possessed. Here, a broad perspective is required: one which pays regard to the great extent and variety and the poly-centric political character of the German lands themselves. For Germany, it will not be possible to limit investigation to images and symbols disseminated from just a single dominant ideological centre, as no such centre existed.[19] Speaking of notions or images of German identity, moreover, raises many further questions. Of what did these consist? Who made, propagated and received them? How were they spread? On what sources, what authorities, did they

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[15] Notably, the work of Hermann Heimpel: see below, Ch. 1, pp. 33–6.

[16] For these developments, see Moraw, 'Kontinuität', pp. 134–7.

[17] Thus H. Münkler, 'Einleitung', in Münkler, Grünberger and Mayer, *Nationenbildung*, esp. pp. 13–14.

[18] The role of crisis in identity-formation has been relatively little studied by historians of pre-modern Europe. Problems and approaches are discussed in Meyer and Dartmann, 'Einleitung'. The ethnogenetic effects of political crisis and failure in one very particular medieval context are considered by Page, *Being Byzantine*, esp. pp. 6–7, 17–18, and Ch. 8.

[19] Essentially the approach taken to late medieval French identity in the influential study by Beaune, *The Birth*.

draw? What modes of thinking did they legitimise, what (if any) obliga-
tions did they enjoin, and how clearly and accessibly were their mes-
sages conveyed? What constitutional principles did they invoke and
what political claims did they stake? Did a general consensus prevail,
or were different, or even contradictory, constructions of Germanness
available? And if the latter, how did people choose between contending
versions? How were Germans' assessments of themselves affected by
the ways in which they were described and judged by others? How did
their self-identifications relate to their own characterisations of their
neighbours? How did late medieval people reconcile being 'German'
with being Bavarian, or Saxon, or Frankish – or with being a cleric from
Cologne, a merchant resident in Stockholm, or a courtier serving the
king of Bohemia?

In particular, it will be necessary to ask – why then? Why is such
abundant and varied evidence for German identity – or better, iden-
tities – encountered in the late Middle Ages, a time of the Empire's
relative weakness, when comparatively so much less survives from the
high medieval *Kaiserzeit*, when emperors appeared at times to bestride
the European stage? Answering this question means examining the
working in Germany of those political and governmental structures,
focused on the monarchy, which are so often deemed central to medi-
eval nation-making, and assessing the place of the Empire in the late
medieval German lands. But it also demands that account be taken of
a much wider range of developments in social, economic and cultural
life within (and indeed, particularly at the eastern margins, beyond) the
German lands, in a period which in many spheres witnessed hitherto-
unknown forms and levels of dynamism and creativity.

To investigate these matters, a wide and diverse range of evidence has
been drawn upon, from a period which brought both a rich proliferation
of genres and a remarkable growth in the sheer quantity of texts and
artefacts produced. For the first time in Germany, tracts and treatises
were now composed, which were concerned not only with the character
and condition of the imperial monarchy itself but with its relationship
with the Germans and their lands. These require close attention, but so
too do the numerous and diverse chronicles and annals, by now being
compiled both in Latin and in the vernacular, from the German lands.
Vernacular legal manuals, assembled particularly in the thirteenth cen-
tury, but very widely copied and disseminated throughout the period,
are another characteristic genre, from which much is to be gleaned.
Governmental and administrative documents expanded massively in
number, with even the imperial chancery showing a significant abso-
lute increase in output, and with the German vernacular once again

becoming entrenched alongside Latin. Something of this profusion must also be sampled, and attention given to the content not only of imperial documents but also of an array of pragmatic writings, both more and less formal in character, produced by princes, towns, nobles and others. Yet the net must be cast wider still if justice is to be done to a period notably prolific in vernacular writings, within a remarkable range of genres. Invocations of varied facets of Germanness are thus to be encountered, fleetingly or more fully, in courtly romances and epics, in political songs and popular rhymes, and in encyclopaedic, didactic, moralising and devotional works. Writings of all these types therefore also find a place in what follows. So too does a diverse assortment of artefacts and visual representations, ranging from buildings and monuments to drawn and painted images, coins and seals. Taking some account of non-textual media (which also include rituals and public spectacles) is particularly important when surveying the mental landscapes of an era so much preoccupied – in Germany, no less than elsewhere – with image-making and political communication.

Yet the present book is also, on a subsidiary level, inescapably concerned throughout with *modern* German identities, and with the shifting self-images which modern Germans have sought – and more lately chosen not to seek – in the Middle Ages. Only by understanding why some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germans read the early evidence for German identity as they did does it become possible to judge it afresh. The author is untypical among writers in the field in not himself being German; and most of what follows was written from a vantage point in the north-east of England. None of that, of course, renders him an objective witness, or constitutes assurance that he has not merely fashioned a new distorting mirror with its own, different, distortions. Whether he has or not, and if so what corrections should apply, others must judge.

Our route therefore proceeds broadly from modernity to the late Middle Ages, and to an ever-closer engagement with the medieval evidence – though rarely will we be able to leave modernity behind us altogether. Chapter 1 is concerned with what modern Germans made of the medieval German nation, what it has meant to them, and how and why its importance has changed. Chapter 2 examines the state-centred paradigm of nation-making which has proved so influential among medievalists generally, and assesses the extent and character of formal political structures in Germany. In Chapter 3 an attempt is made to rethink the role of power and government in the formation of collective identities by investigating the capacity of the German lands to function as a stage for political communications. With the

next three chapters, the focus moves from structures and paradigms to late medieval concepts and ideas. Chapter 4 considers how far Germany was understood in this period as a discrete political community, while Chapter 5 reviews the significance of the imperial idea itself as a source for late medieval identities. In Chapter 6, the relationship between imperial doctrines and ideas of a specifically German political role is scrutinised. The last five chapters look more closely at the content of late medieval German identity. Chapter 7 asks whether notions of a common past were really as insubstantial in Germany as is often alleged. Chapters 8 and 9 examine the construction of the Germans as a people in relation to other, neighbouring peoples, respectively in the south and west and in the north and east. Chapters 10 and 11 look more closely at some of the components of late medieval Germanness: the spatial construction of 'Germany', the names and concepts available to describe a German community, and the idea of the Germans as a people defined by law and by common language. Finally, consideration is given to the relationship between German identity and other, more geographically limited affinities within a strongly regionalised, late medieval landscape.

Concepts, terms, names

'See, I have this day set thee over the nations [*gentes*] and over the kingdoms [*regna*]', God tells the prophet Jeremiah.[20] Literate people in the Middle Ages – and the non-literate too, when they listened or looked – found a rich and insistent language of peoplehood enshrined within the Bible itself.[21] Thinking of an ethnically ordered world came naturally to them. Peoples were fundamental: there were *gentes* before ever there were social ranks, explained the treatise-writer Alexander von Roes.[22] No less natural was to distinguish (indeed, discriminate) between different peoples, because that was what God himself was seen to do. A modest degree of Latin learning granted access to the ethnographic lore of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Fortified with this, the medieval reader was able to explain even more cogently what set different peoples apart from one another, why they looked and acted as they did and why some would conquer and others be subjugated.[23]

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[20] Jeremiah 1:10.
[21] For a biblically derived language of nationhood in late medieval England, see Ruddick, 'National sentiment'.
[22] Alexander von Roes, *Noticia seculi*, cap. 15, ed. Grundmann and Heimpel, p. 161.
[23] See below, Ch. 8, esp. pp. 356–60.

Nor was it only the Latinate whose cultural world was marked out in ethnic colours. Anyone experiencing, as text or oral performance, vernacular epic poetry (and, by the late Middle Ages, prose) might find themselves drawn into landscapes of contending peoples. The colourful multi-ethnic throng, of knights *von vil maniger sprâche*, which rides out to greet Kriemhild when she comes to Etzel's court in the *Nibelungenlied* is just one vivid encapsulation of a characteristic mode of thought.[24] Medieval people similarly encountered a world of ethnic divisions when they read chronicles of the past, or of their own times, or listened to such chronicles being read to them. The same vision of a richly and diversely peopled world was also to be discovered in devotional writings. A princely court thronged with 'Hungarians and Russians, Saxons and Prussians' (not to mention knights 'from all the German lands') thus furnishes a natural backdrop for the life of St Elizabeth of Thuringia (d. 1231), in a hagiographic account in German verse.[25] Ethnic divisions, it was widely maintained, were both fundamental and immediately recognisable.

They were not, of course, the only distinctions that mattered. Indeed, they would certainly not have been the ones that mattered most to the majority of people in their daily lives. Nevertheless, the idea of belonging to an extended community of history, culture and descent was a significant co-ordinate, alongside others, on many people's maps of selfhood. Such notions were, of course, constructs – fictions, if we will – supplying no objective explanation for the affinities and divisions which medieval people imagined and experienced. But they could prove to be powerfully compelling constructs nevertheless, resting upon venerable authorities and often drawing additional force from the way in which they appeared to underlie and explain contemporary political configurations.[26] Between the twelfth century and the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, peoples and nations became the subject of increasingly widespread and articulate reference within a growing range of genres.[27]

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[24] *Der Nibelunge Nôt*, ed. Bartsch, vol. I, p. xxii. âventiure, pp. 219–20, str. 1338–40. The *Nibelungenlied* remained influential throughout the late Middle Ages: when fragments are also counted, significantly more manuscripts are known from the fourteenth than the thirteenth century: M. Curschmann, '"Nibelungenlied" und "Klage"', in *VL* 6, cols. 926–69 (here cols. 928, 959–60).

[25] *Das Leben der Heiligen Elisabeth*, ed. Rieger, p. 67, vv. 153–62: 'Man suochte den wiganden / uz allen tuschen landen. / Ungere unde Ruzen, / Sassen unde Pruzen, / Denen mit den Winden / sich liezen ouch da vinden. / Beheime unde Polane, / mit graven di sopane, / dinstherren unde frien vil, / di alle suochten ritter spil.'

[26] For the idea of political communities as the frameworks for peoples, see below, Ch. 2, pp. 56–65.

[27] See the survey by Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Peoples* (pp. 26–7, 32, 39–40) for some of the evidence for a growing ethnocentrism in the late Middle Ages.

There was nothing rare or anomalous about their invocation. The lapidary assurance proffered by one authoritative-looking modern handbook, that 'the nation' was a foreign concept to 'the medieval mind', is invalidated by the briefest inspection of the evidence.[28]

To give such ideas expression, there existed a rich and flexible vocabulary in Latin and the vernaculars. Fundamental Latin terms were *gens*, *populus* and *natio*.[29] In German, aspects of the same ideas were captured in *diet*, *liut* and (although with different and more limited significance than later) *volc*, as well as, perhaps most characteristically, *zunge*.[30] The objection is sometimes raised that the medieval vocabulary of peoplehood is not directly translatable into a modern language of race and nation. There were no medieval words for ethnic groups or nations that could not also stand for other kinds of affinity; and there was no such term which has cognates of identical meaning in modern European languages. Yet none of this is either surprising or especially troubling. Medieval writers were generally capable of making their own meanings fairly plain. To do so, they were able to draw upon a rich array of auxiliary terms, which proved suitable for defining, distinguishing and judging ethnic groups and for explaining their relationships with political power and with one another. Of course, they applied and adapted their vocabulary with the same pragmatic and easy-going inconsistency with which most people have employed ethnic terms in most ages and societies.

Historians can claim no such latitude, however. They expect to have to justify their choices of terminology, and understand the importance of clarity in analysis and exposition. Unfortunately, among medievalists in pursuit of the nation, the quest for terminological orderliness has often tended to have an opposite outcome. While a bold minority have felt able to discover even full-blown nationalism in their sources, most have urged more cautious approaches, with some ruling 'nation' itself off-limits for the pre-modern world, and many recoiling from the

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[28] 'The medieval mind did not think in terms of *nation* and *nationalism*.' Thus the unattributed entry under the heading 'Medieval Nationalism', in Motyl (ed.), *Encyclopedia*, p. 331. The second part of the proposition is defensible; the first is not.

[29] For the broad semantic fields covered by these terms, compare *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, ed. Niermeyer and van de Kieft, pp. 610, 930, 1060–1, with *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, ed. Latham, pp. 1065–6, 1888, 2348. Their use and interrelationship are explored in Görlich, *Zur Frage*, pp. 75–6, 89, 106–7; Bartlett, 'Medieval and modern concepts'. For *natio*, see also Kahl, 'Einige Beobachtungen'; Nonn, 'Heiliges Römisches Reich', esp. pp. 130–7.

[30] *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, ed. Lexer, vol. I, pp. 430, 1942–3, vol. III, p. 437. For *zunge*, see below, Ch. 10, p. 481.