

to a mythical "King of Harlem" and his play *The Public* all exemplify this expanded cognizance. They universalize the themes of *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*—plays in which a Sophoclean fate works through the "Spanish" ideas of honor, class, and family—plays that were about to bring their author international recognition.

New York was immediately followed by three months of deliverance in "Andalusian" Cuba. Then came the brief halcyon years of applauded production and performance in republican Spain and triumphal visits to Argentina and Uruguay. But fascism soon closed in, and Lorca, in seeming compliance with the death obsession

that marked his life and writings, was among the first to be immolated. In 1936, at the age 38, Lorca was killed by the *Falangistes*, anti-Republicans who hated him for his spoofs of tradition and his disrespect for authority. Lorca's was a needless death, and what was lost is underscored by recalling that Lorca's youthful friends, Dali and Buñuel, were alive and working into the 1980s. No one speaks with more authority on this grievous matter than Ian Gibson, whose previous book on the poet is *The Assassination of Federico García Lorca*.

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How Different is Germany?

A GERMAN IDENTITY, 1770–1990. By Harold James. Routledge. 240 pp. \$25

The "German question" is with us again—more so, it seems, with each passing day.

The looming possibility of German reunification has sparked a controversy within West Germany both among political parties and in the press. More recently, in East Germany, we have witnessed the collapse of the old government leadership and the spectacle of East Germans freely crossing the once-impregnable Berlin Wall. These developments—as well as shifts in East-West relations—speak louder than mere words that reunification is very much an "open question." One recent poll found that 73 percent of East Germans and 79 percent of West Germans favored a single state.

But if the issue of German reunification stirs passions inside Germany, it frequently triggers panic abroad. For whenever Germany has been united and strong in the past—as in 1871, 1914, and 1939—war has never been far away. Today's situation, however, appears significantly different: West Germany has known a stable demo-

cratic government for 45 years, and territorial conquest hardly seems desirable, much less feasible. With the borders between the two sectors open, many political analysts are now anticipating that Germany will be reunited in a few years. But others with longer memories fear there is something singular about the nation that makes reunification far less attractive.

This question of Germany's singularity is the subject of Harold James's new book: an investigation of "German identity" for the past 200 years. It is to the credit of James, a professor of history at Princeton, that he casts new light on this much-debated subject. As an economic historian, he provides an intriguing thesis, namely, that German unity has always rested on the promise of economic growth, and that this peculiarity has made Germany uniquely volatile since the founding of the Second Reich in 1871.

James argues that German sovereignty was always fragile because it had only an economic, and not a historical or a geographical, basis on which to build a modern national identity. France and England have rested on the same core of recognizable territory for centuries—centuries



Otto von Bismarck, about 1876

during which “Germany” had no specific geographical meaning. Until the 19th century, the German-speaking Holy Roman Empire consisted of 350 separate states; after the Congress of Vienna (1815), “Germany” was 39 sovereign states dominated, from afar, by Vienna. By contrast, as James points out, England and France were cemented by institutions and constitutions—a single monarch, Parliament, the National Assembly, the Magna Carta, the Rights of Man—for which Germany had no historic parallels.

Given such considerations, James’s question seems pertinent: How have Germans conceived of Germany? The question is more intriguing now than ever because—whatever Germany is—if reunited, with a population of 80 million, it will dominate the European continent.

As James shows, Germany has long possessed a rich cultural and intellectual heritage. Indeed, during the first 100 years which he briefly discusses—1770 to 1870—German national identity rested on a sense of cosmopolitan cultural achieve-

ment. The writers Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin, the classicist Johann Winckelmann, and the historian Leopold von Ranke might have provided a cultural basis for “the building blocks of German national identity.” But the founder of the Empire, Otto von Bismarck, distrusted intellectuals as much as he did democrats. Bismarck founded the new Germany on “blood and iron.” Doing so, he developed what James calls a “mongrel state form” that held together competing interests with promises of economic prosperity and the security of a welfare state.

As long as prosperity held, Bismarck’s economic nationalism seemed to work reasonably well. But whenever economic prosperity declined—first during the 1880s, then notoriously during the 1920s—a cultural and racist nationalism, at odds with industrial civilization, challenged the Bismarckian achievement. Ironically, Hitler created an economic miracle only to sacrifice it to his racist and anti-communist agendas.

In 1945 a devastated Germany yearned for nothing more than a return to economic stability. The occupying powers agreed to give the Germans what they wanted, although on terms the powers themselves set. For “East” and “West” Germany, yoked to economic and political systems which limited their sovereignty, national unity seemed not only unrealizable but undesirable. But now with the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union waning and the economic future increasingly uncertain, cultural nationalism has emerged once more.

Yet if the German question is with us again, one wonders whether it is as peculiarly German as James would have us believe: Is Germany’s identity uniquely faulty? After all, national identity is a concept invented in the 19th century as a means of understanding, and managing, the bewildering changes that the recent democratic and industrial revolutions unleashed. The historical profession, which also took form in the 19th century, helped create a usable past for the new concept of

nationalism. Jules Michelet (1798–1874) in France, Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) in England, and Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) in Germany constructed notions of “la Nation,” “the People,” “das Volk” whose cohesion was seen as natural. Furthermore, these notions supported projects (e.g., standardization of language; national road systems; colonial adventures) which the nation-building elites had in mind. The creation of national museums, monuments, and holidays reinforced the new myths of national consensus and continuity. Even today, academic history is still usually framed in national terms.

Over the past decades, however, the concept of national identity itself has come under closer scrutiny. Historians and social scientists now see that, like race and gender, it is not so much an object as a category of knowledge, whose relationship to the actual consciousness or behavior of the people it supposedly refers to is highly questionable. The 19th-century Irish, for example, enlisted more willingly in the service of the British empire than they did in their own nationalist cause. Peasants in obscure corners of France became patriotic Frenchmen only in time to die in the First World War. The working-class “pals” who marched to English recruiting stations in 1914 had loyalties more local than national. The Great War, once thought of as being provoked by nationalist passions, is now viewed as helping create those national identities.

James is aware of the constructed quality of national identity, which he calls “manipulated nationalism,” but he seems to think that it is a peculiar property of German history. When he talks of the “absence of a natural national cohesion,” James seems haunted by a contrasting image of a “normal” German identity. Yet what constitutes his vision of Germany’s normal identity—classless, genderless, unburdened by generational tension—hardly applies to or describes any existing nation.

James assumes that a “natural” German identity would have made for a less tumultuous European as well as German history, but this is not a proposition that can ever be tested.

If we look to those nation-states, like Britain and France, which represent for James normal national development, we find them to be riven equally by class and gender conflict and subject to similar bloody ruptures. From the French Revolution onwards, the concept of nationalism itself has been, throughout Europe (and elsewhere), an instrument of power for elites who claim to represent the national interest. The very idea of one indivisible people can mask real differences and subjugate the interests of working people, women, and ethnic minorities. The supposedly natural cohesion of the British and the French did not bring women and workers to participation in political power any sooner.

James is right in stressing the extent to which German stability is dependent on economic growth but wrong in thinking this exceptional. Today’s uncertain international economy arouses anxieties that cannot easily be satisfied within the present nationally oriented political order. Ecological catastrophes as well as economic booms and busts do not recognize borders; recent events in East Europe testify to the fact that even political developments are hard to confine within national boundaries. Under these conditions it would be all too easy for German reunification to provide a convenient displacement for debates that other peoples, including Americans, should be facing more directly. Above all, we need to re-think the concept of national identity itself and to consider alternatives better suited to the late 20th century.

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