The Social and Religious Meaning of Nationalism: The Case of Prussian Conservatism 1815-1871
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European History Quarterly 2008; 38; 525
DOI: 10.1177/0265691408094531

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ehq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/38/4/525
German nationalism has become the focus of voluminous research, especially since the end of the Second World War. The murderous expression lent to the national idea by National Socialism made the search for its origins an infinite one. In their endeavours to explain the radical manifestations of nationalism under the Nazi regime, historians have often turned to the nineteenth century. The attempts to establish a link between previous and later forms of nationalism served as a methodological pattern well known to the historians of ideas.\(^1\) Völkisch, ethnic, social and racial criteria were themes linking earlier definitions of national identity and those clearly manifested in later fascist and Nazi ideologies.\(^2\)

There is consensus among historians that, already in the late eighteenth century, German liberals were the main bearers of nationalism, and endeavoured to realize it in a unified German state until it was accomplished in 1871.\(^3\) Discussions of nationalism and national identity, however, do not seem to have addressed its conservative version adequately. The still widespread argument in this regard is that conservatives were reluctant to embrace nationalism because of its revolutionary implications.\(^4\) From 1871, when German national unification became a reality — and certainly since the ‘Second Reichsgründung’ in 1878/9, when Bismarck sought the conservatives’ support and made them part of his coalition — they embraced nationalism in its chauvinist, anti-Semitic and racist version. That kind of nationalism helped conservatives in Imperial Germany to manipulate public opinion and combat modernization. It is this argument which helps to explain the functional transformation of nationalism from an emancipating liberal oppositional ideology before 1871, to an aggressive authoritarian ideology of the German Empire thereafter, one that moved from ‘left’ to ‘right’.\(^5\)
Yet such an explanation underestimates the conservatives’ discourse regarding nationalism. Was their version of nationalism only a newly designed concept aimed at justifying the young German state? Did it serve as a mere instrumental ideology for the fulfilment of the conservative elite’s interests?

The clear division between pre-1871 liberal nationalism and the chauvinistic nationalism of the Empire looks an artificial one. It was rather the simultaneous existence of both tendencies within German nationalism, but not the gradual transformation from one sort to another. Recent interpretations advanced the idea that Prussian conservatives had already acknowledged nationalism since the Vormärz, and had lent it its final version in 1876 with the foundation of the German Conservative Party (DKP). Support for this interpretation can be found in the 100-year-old classical work of Friedrich Meinecke, Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Meinecke still remains one of the few who dealt in a detailed manner with the development of national thought within conservative circles: from the first half of the nineteenth century, conservatives in Prussia and other parts of Germany realized it was unwise to leave the question of national identity and unity in the hands of their liberal rivals. At the same time, they found it almost impossible to accommodate modern nationalism and its inevitable political consequences.

This quandary in which the conservatives found themselves raises some intriguing questions: how could they integrate the main idea of nationalism within the conservative ideology? What were the main criteria and essence of national identity, as they defined them? And as has already been asked at the beginning of this essay, can this conservative version of nationalism help to explain the radical manifestations of the Nazi and fascist nationalism of the twentieth century?

To answer these questions we need to analyse the peculiar relationship between the essence of national identity, which lacks an appropriate historiographical treatment, and the traditional concept of state and society in conservative thought. It is this relationship that facilitates the understanding of the conservative idea of nationalism. Furthermore, a consideration of this relationship introduces social and ethical aspects into nineteenth-century German nationalism that hitherto have not been adequately assessed, and at the same time it explores the various reasons for the conservative solution to the unification of Germany as early as the first half of the century.

To demonstrate my argument I will examine the writings of some prominent conservative thinkers of this period, as well as those of the conservative press and some political programmes. Such an examination illustrates the importance that the subject under discussion acquired among conservative circles as well as its more practical implications.
Social Change as a Catalyst for Forging Collective Identity

Conservatism as an ideology began to crystallize after the French Revolution. Indeed, some German intellectuals had already criticized the ideas of the Enlightenment before 1789. As yet, those criticisms and arguments did not constitute an entire ideological system, like the one put forward in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century by people such as Adam Müller and Carl Ludwig von Haller. These two scholars, among others, label conservatism as an ‘aristocratic’ ideology which cherishes feudalism, social status, agrarian interests and traditional forms of authority. As such, conservatism was born as a response by a social group, mainly the agrarian aristocracy, to the French revolution and liberalism. It is this kind of conservatism that Karl Mannheim defined as ‘modern conservatism’ (in contrast to ‘natural conservatism’).

However, conservatism in Germany was not embraced solely by the agrarian aristocracy, and not all members of that group were conservatives. It found supporters among the military and bureaucratic elites, religious circles and some intellectuals at the universities. Moreover, German conservatism was different from the English and the French, in its ideological as well as its practical form. Although the realism of Edmund Burke differed from the pathos of Joseph de Maistre, as early as the first half of the nineteenth century conservatism in both countries was more flexible and constitutionally oriented than in Germany. The fact that the agrarian aristocracy in Prussia and other parts of Germany still enjoyed some feudal privileges and considerable authority at the local level helped to make that group less willing to compromise. Its dominant romantic ideals and ethos also lent German conservatism a more rigid nature.

While, in Germany, conservatism as an ideology was expressed through scholarly written works, such as those of Gentz, Müller, Marwitz, Haller and others, and while conservatives could feel more secure in their positions in the age of restoration that followed the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna, economic and social developments were starting to disturb their serenity. Gradually, conservatives became aware of the constant threat such changes might pose to the traditional order of state and society. The combination of social crisis, which from the 1820s on became the ‘Social Question’ (die Soziale Frage), and political unrest from the 1830s onwards created a background in which conservatives started contemplating the meaning and importance of collective identity and nationalism.

If one takes into consideration Ernest Gellner’s theory of nationalism, a better understanding is possible of the circumstances that stimulated the conservative
discussion of nationalism and collective identity. According to the British-based sociologist and anthropologist, nationalism as a theory of political legitimacy is relevant only at a specific stage of social development. In traditional agrarian societies, the individual’s place in society is predetermined, and other cultural or ethnic criteria enforced from outside are unnecessary. By contrast, Gellner argues that modern, industrial society is more dynamic. It sharpens differences between ethnic and national groups, thus making the need for new defining criteria of collective identity more acute.12

Although some doubts might be raised as to the validity of Gellner’s theory in relation to the timing of the early German liberal debate about national identity, they are considerably allayed when examining the timing and development of the conservative versions of nationalism and national identity.

The discussion of nationalism by some liberal intellectuals had already begun at the end of the eighteenth century,13 reaching its first height during the Napoleonic occupation in Germany and the ensuing Wars of Liberation. For the conservatives, however, those wars were fought between the principles of Christianity, legitimism, freedom and justice on the one side, and the revolutionary principles which the French hoped to spread, on the other. These wars, according to conservatives, actually bore a universal essence.14 Therefore, the in-depth and extensive debate of nationalism within conservative circles began during the 1830s and intensified in the wake of the mid-century revolutions. From this perspective, a parallel is discernible between the development of industrial and modern society in Germany (first and foremost in Prussia) and the timing of the conservative discourse around nationalism and national identity. Moreover, the content of this collective national identity testifies to the importance they attributed to social relations and Christian values in the emerging modern industrial age and social atomization. At this point, the correlation becomes clearer between economic and social disintegration, on the one hand, and the need to formulate a common identity that preserves specific social order and religious values, on the other.

For their part, the conservatives rejected the idea of a modern German nation-state, though they were aware of the need to define German collective identity on an alternative ground. Their definition of national identity and its political implications would thus refute the idea of the nation as an autonomic political subject and its realization within the framework of a nation-state, according to the liberal version. At the same time, it had to secure the special status that many of them enjoyed as members of the aristocracy within the changing social structures.15 National identity, as formulated by Prussian conservatives from the second third of the nineteenth century, rested therefore on two main foundations: the first was belonging to a well-defined social order based on partnership and hierarchy; the
second was religious belief, exemplified in the values guiding state and society, and the church’s special role in preserving them. The specific content lent to these foundations by the conservatives made their version of national identity a distinctive one, different from the later racist and fascist nationalism often ascribed to it.

The Social Essence of the Nation

One of the first Prussian conservatives who pointed out the correlation between the community-like (gemeinschaftlich) social structure and the nation was Adam Müller. Müller, a scholar and publicist, was a well known figure at the princely courts of Prussia and Germany, and at a later period served in Metternich’s administration. In much of his writings he tried to rationalize the traditional political and social order, while not avoiding a confrontation with the changes that had occurred in his era, for example the new developments in the economic utilization of agriculture and the growing private commercial interests in land. Müller’s discussion of the analogy between the social structure and the nation also provides an initial insight into the romantic inclinations among specific intellectual circles in Germany at the outset of the nineteenth century. Together with other romantic conservatives of the period, such as Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Gentz, Müller opposed not just the French occupation itself, but also the modernization and revolutionary principles that characterized Napoleonic rule in Germany. This was mainly because of the differences between French and German Romanticism. Unlike the French, German Romantics endeavoured to disconnect themselves from the revolutionary connotations attached to Romanticism. They cherished tradition, social cooperation and brotherhood, and expressed a longing for an un-individualistic organic unity exemplified in the Volk.17

These communal and organic foundations of German Romanticism are well-expressed in Müller’s essay from 1816, Versuche einer Theorie des Geldes mit besondere Rücksicht auf Großbritannien. Müller sees a great deal of similarity between the nation and the household. He laments the disintegration of the old household, in which each member had a specific role to perform, as being part of a rich entirety that creates a sense of belonging. Accordingly, Müller declares that the family is the ‘model for all social order’ (Sinnbild aller gesellschaftlichen Ordnung), and the household of the family, as it emerges from his argument, serves as a pattern for the nation (Haushaltung einer Nation). In his analysis Müller also uses the word ‘state’ in a similar way to the word ‘nation’. He considers the state a framework that exists due to the endeavours of its inhabitants. Müller’s specific discussion does not include a definition of a nation, and it often appears that he is conflating the terms ‘nation’ and ‘state’.19 However, in the
context of Müller’s discussion, both words have connotations of communality, and in the German political discourse of the late eighteenth century the word ‘state’ also had the meaning of community.20

The analogy that Müller draws between family, society and nation serves as an indication of his understanding regarding the nature of the communal collective and the relations that have to bind its members. That kind of relation reflects the organic romantic perception of the nation, which diverges from the liberal definition of the term. According to this perception, as manifest in Müller’s writings, the nation has no egalitarian dimension. Its familial essence secures a priori the hierarchical social order and, in practice, the different legal status of the members. Therefore, the social structure is to find its ultimate realization in the nation and the state. For Müller, even those in the lowest ranks of the family enjoy the same feeling of belonging to the totality, due to the simple fact that they contribute their own share to it. In this regard, the idea of the communal and familial foundations of state and nation accords with the conservative definitions of society and state as organisms whose parts, though different, function harmoniously.

Although Müller attaches immense importance to the relations that bind all together, his specific discussion of the issue does not contain any reference to exclusive characters which might differentiate between one nation and the other. Müller’s definition focuses on the ‘appropriate’ political and social order, and not on an order characterizing the Prussian or the German nation.

The analogy between the structure of the family and the nation remained central in the conservative debate on the nation and national identity in the following decades. More than thirty years after Müller published his work the parallel he drew was expressed in the description of Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach, one of the most prominent figures among Prussian conservatives in the mid-nineteenth century.21 Gerlach was one of the founders of the Neue Preussische (Kreuz-) Zeitung, a newspaper that was launched in the wake of the 1848 revolution and became the mouthpiece of Prussian conservatives, thus helping them influence public opinion.

In lengthy monthly articles known as the Rundschau, Gerlach would present his thoughts and comments on ideological matters as well as current affairs. Although he was respectful toward Haller and his theory, Gerlach did not perceive the state as a mere collection of feudal contracts, without any common higher aim. In his political theology he envisioned the state as originating in God Himself, the overlord of kings and princes who served as His vassals in this world. In its essence, the state was to embody God’s laws and to keep people away from sin. On this same ground, Gerlach utterly rejected the idea of popular
sovereignty, and could not agree with the principle of handing over political leadership to the people. Therefore, during the 1848 revolution he refused to give any political expression to the specific character of a nation. He considered the nation as an extension of the family, and for this reason it could not emerge from below, from the people, but rather needed a higher political authority, a ‘father’, a monarch. This similarity, according to Gerlach, was visible also in the division of power within the nation and the relations that bound it together. However, in this context, Gerlach did not speak of any specific nation, as Müller did earlier, but rather described the ideal structure of relations that ought to exist in every nation. In order to find higher affinity between the idea of the nation as reflecting a specific social order and the character of a particular nation, one should turn to the writings of Friedrich Julius Stahl, the prominent ideologist of Prussian conservatism in the mid-nineteenth century. His discussion goes beyond the structural analogy of the family and the nation and analyses an evolutionary process, both socially and politically.

Born to a Jewish family from Würzburg, Stahl converted to Protestantism at the age of seventeen. He studied law at the universities of Heidelberg and Erlangen and became a professor during the 1830s. From 1840 on, Stahl was a professor of law at the University of Berlin, and later a member of the Prussian Landtag and Upper House (erste Kammer). Although he published his main political philosophy before the 1848 revolution, he was considered liberal in Prussian conservative circles. It was only in the wake of the revolution and the crisis faced by the conservatives that they adopted him as the most articulate thinker of German conservatism. Stahl’s political philosophy reflects a recognition of the public and modern aspects of state and society. It suggested a revised conservative ideology at an era when political patterns that had characterized the early years of the restoration proved to be less and less adequate for the changing circumstances of the 1830s and 1840s. It also indicates his awareness of the intensity of the emerging capitalist system and the beginning of social mobilization that took place in the Vormärz.

In his writings Stahl formulated a conservative political theory based on religious principles. He saw the organic order of state and society as a reflection of God’s essence and might. In a similar manner to Haller and Gerlach, Stahl also understood the state as fulfilling God’s commandments. But he departed from these two conservatives’ views by the fact that he did not reject outright all aspects of modernism. Unlike Gerlach, Stahl did not consider God as a feudal overlord, and in contrast to Haller he refused to treat the state as an entity constituted of different feudal contracts. In an essay he wrote in 1845 entitled ‘Das monarchische Princip’, Stahl endorsed the principle that the monarch’s personal authority
should be retained, but it should also have a constitutional dimension in the form of a representative institution. This institution, however, should not be sovereign. The power of the people’s representatives would lie only in advising the king and approving taxes. For Gerlach, this kind of constitutionalism was ‘vulgar’ (constitutionalismus vulgaris).

The fusion of modern aspects into Stahl’s conservative theory is well reflected in his discussion about the Volk and its implied unique identity. In one of his early and most important books, Die Philosophie des Rechts (1833–7), Stahl expresses the idea that just as the state was an entity which constitutes all the branches of human destination, so the people, das Volk, living in the state, exemplify all the orientations and resources that are united together due to the common origin (Einheit der Abstammung). For Stahl, the people alone could comprise different divisions of activities, while at the same time remaining united according to the needs of the state. This relation between the people and the state, as derived from Stahl’s theory, is the most fundamental to the existence of the state. For only in the Volk can one find the necessary bonds and potential for different activities required for preserving order and creating a common consciousness. In this regard, for Stahl the Volk means a force of nature and a community-like partnership (Gemeinschaft) that obtains its legal sanction from the state.

Yet this description of the Volk does not have to be interpreted as an earlier or an original form of the later racial Volksgemeinschaft. Although Stahl speaks about the ethnic origin of the Volk, its main quality is a social one. It should also be noticed, however, that nowhere in his argument does Stahl acknowledge any sovereignty of the people. The Volk he writes about is not the Volk as an autonomous political entity, but rather a social one. That does not prevent Stahl from eventually establishing the links between a state and the peculiarities of the Volk.

Stahl believes that the destination of a Volk is a state. Unlike the whole human race, which is characterized by universalistic dimensions, a people has a far more particularistic nature, which is to be materialized within the state. But the real meaning of Stahl’s argument is this: the Volk, which he considers as the nation, determines the nature of the state, its peculiarities, in accordance with its social structure (of the Volk), its division into estates (Stände) and professions, and the part that each member of the Volk contributes to the nation’s unique character. The division of the nation into estates and professions such as king, clergy, bureaucracy, nobility, scholars, craftsmen and so forth, designates the nation’s peculiarities. Each estate is important not due to the number of its members, but rather for its reflection of the ‘people’s spirit’ (Volksgeist).

The inner bonds between the estates, which are based on the familial model,
and the unique character that each estate contributes to the spirit of the *Volk* — all of these define, according to Stahl, the nation’s separate identity. It is this disposition which creates a common consciousness and determines the nature of the nation. The common origin is actually only of secondary importance since in itself it does not determine the national identity. Such criteria, combined with Stahl’s explanation that the people does not hold any sovereignty or political power, created a new definition for pertinence to the entirety, differing from the national liberal one. In his argument, the link between national peculiarities and their political expressions is vague. It tries to emphasize a people’s exclusiveness in respect of the social relations that sustain it. The *Volk* can be considered as a basis for the nation only by exemplifying a specific social order, but not as a collection of individuals who live together in a defined political unit. It is the same correlation that endows the nation, the *Volk*, and society with the same significance. At the same time, Stahl tries to preserve the universal dimension of the ruling authority in the sense that the ruler’s power is based on religious legitimacy without requiring the consent of the people.

Stahl’s attitude towards the question of collective identity demonstrates the romantic inclination and ideological principles of conservative thought. It seems that Stahl consented to see Germany as a unified nation whose population had its own identity. Accordingly, the nation served as a natural foundation for the state. But the importance he ascribed to the nation stopped short at the point where the patterns of rule and social order had to be changed in order to let the nation have its ultimate political expression. Stahl, like other conservatives, could not accept the political implications of modern nationalism. During the 1848/9 revolution, and as a response to the different proposals for German unification, he also published his views in articles on the *Kreuzzzeitung*, thus trying to address a wider audience. These articles, like his other writings, reflect his belief that the rights and power of the state were independent of the nation. The nation was subordinated to the state, i.e. to the king who rules by the Grace of God. In this regard, the national state was one whose people acquired its political meaning through subordination to the legitimate ruler. In accordance with this attitude, he supported a German national unification that would preserve the status of the German princes, although subjected to higher imperial and sovereign authority, that of the supposed German Emperor. Hence, from the political aspect, the peculiarity of the nation was far less important.  

Views of that sort were also echoed on a more practical political level later on, for example in the program of the *Volksverein* — an organization established in 1861 by a group of conservatives and which would facilitate the conservatives’ campaign in the election of that year. The organization’s program called for a unification of the German Father-
land through a unity between princes and people, and adherence to authority and law, without sinking in the ‘filth of a German republic’ (Schmutz einer deutschen Republik).  

The meaning of Stahl’s concept of nationalism and national identity, as well as that of the other conservatives, stood in contrast to the liberal one. According to the outlook of most liberals, as formulated already during the Vormärz, the partnership of the individual with society should be grounded on the assumption that the Volk is sovereign or at least shares sovereignty, and has a will of its own. As a result, the modern national state should be based on constitutional principles and the emancipation of society from the limitations of the old social and political patterns. Yet regarding the structure of the supposed German national union, many moderate German liberals envisioned a similar structure to that presented by Stahl. In a constitutional draft, submitted to the Committee of Seventeen in the Frankfurt assembly by the liberal historian Friedrich Dahlmann during the 1848 revolution, it was made clear that most of the political authority would remain in the hands of the dynastic German monarchies, since they were the only ones who could forge the desired unification. But unlike Stahl and the other conservatives, these liberals believed that the power of the people would be exercised in parliament, though it would not be the people’s alone. King and people were to share sovereignty. For the liberals’ more radical wing and for the democrats, such a solution was unacceptable. They demanded full sovereignty for the people, democratic voting rights and a government that would be responsible for the parliament.

Liberals also differed from conservatives in regard to the nature of society that expresses the national identity. As mentioned above, conservatives thought of the hierarchically structured social order as a reflection of the healthy organic social relations. The nature of these relations between the social classes became the denominator of the nation’s spirit. Premises of this kind enabled Stahl to create a synthesis between the national idea and traditional conservative social outlooks. This conservative ideal of a hierarchical social order, however, was not congruent with the liberals’ one. In the Vormärz, and actually until 1850, there was a group of liberals who believed in an ideal future structure of a society which would not be dominated by class interests. Such a classless civil society (klassenlose Bürgergesellschaft) required the loosening of the close connection between liberalism and the interests of the propertied bourgeoisie, in favour of a more general struggle for social and political equal rights. However, this model was too optimistic for a society going through a process of industrialization, a model which could not survive the threshold of the mid-century. From 1850 on, there developed an ever-closer identification between liberalism and the Bildungs- and
Besitzbürgertum, a process that gradually turned liberalism into a Klassenpartei that lost its integrative potential.\textsuperscript{34}

For their part, conservatives continued to emphasize the importance of social relations and familial model as factors in defining national identity in the decades after the revolution, and these arguments were featured in the conservative press which, from mid-century, became a major instrument for winning over public opinion. In 1867, for example, the \textit{Berliner Revue (BR)}, a weekly conservative magazine dealing mainly with social issues, dedicated a series of articles to the unique defining traits of the nation. The writer in the magazine admitted that it was difficult to specify certain ways of life as national characters. Nevertheless, when comparing different patterns of living it seemed to him that the family, although not fully proven, was the pattern which has the most authentic potential for defining a nation’s identity. A written constitution could not be considered a factor in defining national identity, because it changed throughout history. This applied equally to other features such as clothes, habits of life and rituals. Even physical characteristics, such as the colour of the hair and eyes, body shape and physiognomy, did not typify specific people. However, the writer appeared to address the German family as an important national aspect, with the greatest authenticity. According to the writer, no-one could deny that German family life differed from that of the Slavs, the Romans, and even from that of the English.\textsuperscript{35}

For the \textit{BR}, the importance attributed to the German family was more obvious than the German language. Among the Germans themselves, argued the journal, every tribe who settled in a specific place acquired its own unique quality. In every region a different dialect developed.\textsuperscript{36} Here again, differences appear between conservatives and liberals regarding the criteria used for defining national identity. Whereas the liberals saw language as one of the principal cultural features defining German nationalism, it was less important for the conservatives.

Moreover, as a marker of national identity, language had different meanings. As mentioned above, the \textit{BR} rejected physical characteristics as criteria which defined national identity. Yet, for some liberals, the affinity between language, morphology, physical kinship and blood relations was already clear during the \textit{Vormärz}. In their endeavours to demonstrate the authentic national identity of the Germans, some scholars introduced racial elements. For these liberals, the recent findings in the linguistic field regarding the relationship between tongues of the Indo-European family served as a proof of the development of people from similar origins, and of the particular manner in which these people continued to evolve through the centuries. In that evolutionary process, natural circumstances had helped to create external, racial, differences between people. Karl Zachariä, a liberal political theorist, argued that there are no examples where a people of one
race used the language of another. \(^{37}\) Liberals, then, assigned far more importance to language than did the conservatives, who went so far as to argue that among people who dwell in Germany there are some who do not understand the dialect of others. \(^{38}\) These different attitudes toward the German language also demonstrate how racial ideas found their way into the liberal definition of national identity (without biological-racist overtones), \(^{39}\) while they were denied by conservatives.

In an age of modernization, of unprecedented social and economic changes in Germany, and in an era of search for national unification, the BR, as well as other conservatives, \(^{40}\) found the common denominators of the German people in the social and familial structure and in the moral values deriving from it. It seems then that the definition of the German national character by social categories had two main functions: it justified and reconstructed the traditional social order in an age of profound social changes, while at the same time it suggested an alternative to the liberals’ discourse of nationalism and national identity. \(^{41}\) As such, it points to the conservatives’ rejection of any modern, scientific or pseudo-scientific, confirmation of the nations’ identity, since it did not correspond to their traditional and theological patterns of thought.

Social relations and structures also acquired great importance as a factor determining national identity, because they were sanctified by religion. Though Christianity, according to the conservatives, lent social relations their validity, at the same time it had acquired a unique German character. It served as another denominator of the German nation and as the rationale for the creation of the German state. Conservatives were thus able specifically to characterize German state and society.

**The Christian State and Society**

Since the early stages of German nationalism and until the end of the nineteenth century, the place of Christianity as a special denominator of national identity had widened considerably. Among German intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the first years of the nineteenth, different patterns of romantic thought and enlightened rationalism were interlinked. The romantic patterns included willingness for religious compromise between the two German churches. Gradually, some of the confessional differences and tensions between Catholicism and Protestantism became blurred. Intellectuals on both sides tried to emphasize the common elements that unified the two religions and make them complementary. For those intellectuals, Catholicism and Protestantism were phases in the history of Christianity. The differences which separated them were unavoidable in the current period of transition before entering the phase of
reconciliation between the two Christian religions, and the formation of a single unified church. But while in the early stage of German nationalism, inter-Christian religious differences were secondary, they became most important after the religious awakening and the pietism which emerged after the Wars of Liberation and the Congress of Vienna.

The search for religious truths led national romantic thinkers once more to hold fast to the confessional truths, Protestant as well as Catholic, and to create what Thomas Nipperdey called ‘reconfessionalization of religion’ (Rekonfessionalisierung der Religion). This ‘reconfessionalization’ had lent a religious dimension to German national thought in the sense that the solution for Germany’s problems was to be found in Christianity itself. In this regard ‘reconfessionalization of religion’ was paralleled to the ‘confessionalization’ of the national idea. Nevertheless, the religious dimension of nationalism was mainly Protestant, not Catholic. For the Catholics, Protestantism marked a break in the unity of Christianity and a protest against universalistic religious principles, thus becoming the source for all revolutions. On the other hand, the main Protestant thinkers of German nationalism, such as Fichte, Jahn, Schleiermacher and Arndt, indicated the affinity between Protestant Christianity and Germanism. They reiterated the need for breaking away from the burden of papacy, and the importance of Luther in ‘liberating’ the German language, and designating the German people for a new mission.

Among Prussian conservatives in the first half of the nineteenth century, there were some who thought that Catholicism was the religion which lent society its appropriate foundations. Conservatives like Adam Müller, Carl Ludwig von Haller and Carl Ernst Jarcke also converted from Protestantism to Catholicism because they thought that the Catholic Church was the institute that best symbolized the old cultural and social unity. For them, the old church endowed human existence with its aesthetic, philosophic, political and social foundations. On the other hand, the origin of monarchical sovereignty and the justification of its existence were to be found, according to Protestant conservatives, in Lutheran tradition, first and foremost in the writings of Luther. Conflicts between Catholic and Protestant conservatives regarding confessional questions and their political consequences could not be avoided altogether, and they reached one of their peaks in the controversy over mixed marriage, in 1837. In 1841 they also caused the closing-down of the conservative journal Berliner Politisches Wochenblatt. Yet conservatives of both religions acknowledged the importance of Christianity in the struggle against liberalism and revolution. After the Congress of Vienna, Haller’s political theory became an ideological core around which non-formal pietistic circles gathered. In 1816, for example, a group of
Prussian officers and landowners, among them the Gerlach brothers, founded the circle of the ‘May Beetles’ (Maikäferei), after the name of the restaurant where they dined every week. Their discussions focused on culture and philosophy, but from 1817 on, after the publication of the first volume of Haller’s *Restauration der Staats-Wissenschaft*, their discussions became much more political. Although the circle disintegrated, some of its members constituted later the hard core of the conservative camp. In the writings of the Swiss conservative thinker, those men found ideological and theological grounds that helped to refute the revolutionary premises and support the existence of the patrimonial state during the restoration years.\footnote{48}

Carl Ludwig von Haller was born in 1768 to an aristocratic family in Bern. He served in his city’s bureaucratic apparatus until his first emigration, to Austria. In 1806 he returned to Switzerland, where he developed his political theory. Unlike Müller, Haller wrote in an age of a relative stability, after the end of the Napoleonic occupation of Germany, and the struggle between the aristocracy and the bureaucracy over the reforms was drawing to its close through a compromise that left the aristocracy with part of its privileges intact. In this regard, Haller’s theory marks the age of restoration in Germany, as far as the ideological aspect is concerned.

In the *Restauration* Haller did not deal with national identity, and even denied the public aspect of the state, which for him was no more than a kind of private estate of the prince.\footnote{49} He wrote extensively on the role of the Christian religion and church as consolidating social community and characterizing the relations that existed within it, while his discussion had mainly universalistic aspects. However, Prussian conservative thinkers gradually awarded those religious foundations more particular features, so religion and church acquired highly important significance in defining social and national identity.

Haller thought that the existence of a religious belief among a community of believers is not sufficient to preserve that community’s cohesion. It required an external framework in the form of a church which would exist safely and continuously.\footnote{50} The weight he ascribed to religion and church regarding their role in consolidating the community points toward features of collective identity, although at this stage of forming conservative thought it is not so obvious. Yet the church had another task with the potential for defining collective identity. In spite of the universalistic character of Christianity and church, Haller identified the circumstances in which a parallel between religious and ecclesiastical organization and more particular historical circumstances becomes important. When, for example, the reorganization of a state into parishes or dioceses is necessary, it should not be carried out according to natural borders, like rivers and mountains.
If the head of church in the state is able to do so, he should carry out such reorganization according to the needs of believers, their common language, and in consideration of the ‘ease of communications’ (Leichtigkeit der Communikation). Ecclesiastical reorganization, then, is not absolutely universalistic, and its arbitrary application is inappropriate, since it requires current circumstances to be taken into account. Those circumstances characterize a specific community in relation to other ones: the purpose of the community, its size, the common language of the members and their ability to communicate – all of these are particular features. As Haller’s arguments show, the application of universalistic ecclesiastical organization to a community with specific features, even when it turns it into a part of a more general reorganization, simultaneously preserves the community’s unique nature. In this regard, Haller’s argument contains a possibility for the later integration between universalistic and particularistic components in defining the collective identity of the community or society.

A possible example for such an integration may be found in Stahl’s writings. In Der christliche Staat und sein Verhältniß zu Deismus und Judenthum, a book written after a debate held in the Prussian Landtag in 1847 regarding the legal status of the Jews, Stahl analyses the idea of the ‘Christian state’. For him, the term ‘Christian state’ obviously contained universalistic meanings which applied to all Christian states. From the moment Christianity grants legitimacy and the basic foundations to the appropriate order of state and society, and sanctifies the relationship between the monarch and religion, crown and altar, then such an order has to be valid in all Christian states. But Stahl reveals in his writing an attempt to fuse the more general principles of Christianity with the specific circumstances and character of the German state and people.

One can learn about this more peculiar aspect of the state and the people from the synthesis which Stahl made between Christian principles, appropriate social order and national consolidation. For this Prussian professor, the inner division of the people exists in accordance with Christianity. Every harmony of national unity and estate-structure (ständische) development, as well as civil equality and different professions – which, according to the argument, seem to differ from one people to another – can be maintained solely on that foundation (of Christianity). The validity of civil equality and the nationale Gemeinschaft stems from the presupposition that all those who belong to this community were created in the image of God and the belief that He stands above all. But one should not err by interpreting Stahl’s argument as a liberal one. Civil equality is relevant first and foremost to the Christian citizens of the state because of the simple fact that they are citizens of a Christian state. It is equality in civil rights, and does not imply people’s sovereignty. Nor does it mean that Stahl also believed in social equality.
In this regard, he adhered strongly to the sacred meaning of social hierarchy, which was also essential to the harmony of national unity.

In an argument that reminds the reader of Haller’s thought, although differing considerably, Stahl speaks of the importance of the church from a national aspect. If Christianity is the state’s religion, then it is also a public religion. It should serve as an end in itself for the state. Hence, the church has to become a public institute, with national significance. Moreover, if religious principles justified the foundation of all the state’s authority and institutions, then all the servants of the state should be faithful to that religion. Accordingly, the church, as a religious institution, also obtained a nationalistic character by being in charge of religious rituals. Therefore, the combination between the historical circumstances in which specific peoples and states were developed, together with the existence of institutions and laws based on Christianity and applied in almost every aspect of life, granted the people and the state peculiarities of their own, thus making religion and church more national.

Stahl, like Haller before him, wrote about Christianity in itself, i.e. the idea of the ‘Christian state’ and the ‘state’s church’, independent of Catholic or Protestant Christianity. The Catholic Haller and the Protestant Stahl both avoided sharpening the differences between the two religions. And when Stahl deals with the place of Catholics in the state, he argues that the common elements of the two Christian religions are much more important than their differences. This trend was also evident in the ensuing years, although there were other conservatives who tried to identify Protestantism with the German people in general and the Prussian in particular.

Indeed, after 1848 Christianity became critically important in defining conservative ideology and the collective identity that stemmed from it. The revolution was interpreted in a religious context. It was an act committed by heretics who challenged the order ordained by God. In order to reassert the principle of legitimism conservatives clung to religion as a source of ideological inspiration. At the same time, religion served as a component in defining the German national identity. In this regard, the closeness or differentiation between Catholicism and Protestantism became highly relevant in the discussion about the character of the supposed German national union: whether it would be a union as greater Germany which included Austria, or as smaller Germany without her. Most conservatives believed that in the name of Christian solidarity such a national union should include both German powers. However, in the post-revolution years, and especially after the Prussian victory over Austria in 1866, there were also conservatives who thought that Protestantism was the main factor that defined the German collective identity. But before elaborating on the conservative
positions in this matter, it is worthwhile taking a glance at the liberals’ distinctive views on this question.

A greater Germany which included Austria was not only a conservative ideal. It had its own meaning for not a few liberals, although most of the moderate ones thought Prussia was the appropriate kingdom to guide Germany to unification and to lead it afterwards. These liberals, some of them from Austria and south Germany, thought of greater Germany not in the sense of a unification based on Christian solidarity, but rather out of understanding that creating a monolithic German national state might be impossible. During the Vormärz, these liberals believed that shared memories of political unity as well as joined efforts for liberty and public activity had the potential of forging a broader community, which would include members who did not speak the German language or were of German descent. Moreover, through the construction of ‘national memory’, ‘national mythology’ or ‘national historical narrative’ it was possible to cross the boundaries of mere ethno-cultural identity. In such a construction, the German imperial past played an important role. The Holy Roman Empire of the German nation was seen now not just as a symbol of past glory but also as proof for the possibility of multinational rule. As such, it helped to create a historical conscience that was essential for the formation of national identity.59 Such a concept of national unification was different from the ethnic and racial version, mentioned before, and rested on more progressive assumptions than the conservative religious ones.

The conservatives’ adherence to religious belief itself carried within it the essence of national identity and possible ways for its appropriate political realization, as they perceived it. During the 1848 revolution the conservative Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung published an article furiously condemning the revolutionary aspirations that included the separation of religion from state. It had elevated atheism as a guiding principle. It had ruined everything unique to the Germans. In order to save the German people and return its greatness, the people must be brought back to Christianity, for there were no other people in history that had adhered to that religion, from its very beginning, as this people had. Even Tacitus, according to the writer, described the Germans as the best qualified to represent the ‘People of God’ (ein Volk Gottes). Now, in order to save this people, there was a need for the same spiritual power of religious awakening as manifested in the Lutheran Christianity of the Reformation.60

This attitude clearly shows the gap between the conservative and liberal conceptions of national identity. The 1848 revolution, in which liberals strove for a national unification of Germany, was interpreted by the conservative newspaper in universal terms. The creation of a modern political system, based on
constitutional foundations, was seen as the loss of everything particular in the German people. From the moment the people gave up religion, they actually lost every special feature. But it was not just religion in itself: the Germans had an inherent character, manifested in their special, pious religious belief and in their church. In this regard, it seems that, for conservatives, the criteria for defining the modern national identity actually removed every special feature from the state and the people. On the other hand, Christianity and church, which existed throughout the continent, served as a foundation for defining a special identity and acquiring exclusively German features.

But even where conservatives adhered to the idea of a unified church, and refrained from stressing the peculiarities of Lutheran Christianity, they still denied other modern criteria of national identity. In 1849, the Kreuzzeitung published three articles which carried the title *What is Actually the German People? (Was ist eigentlich das deutsche Volk?)* and disagreed with almost every national peculiarity of the German people. Language, physical features, blood relations and even political borders – none of these could define the German people since there was nothing in them that is purely or exclusively German. The only unique German feature was the specific organization of the German church, created as early as the eighth century by St Bonifacius. In view of the current situation, the writer called upon the German powers, among them Catholic Austria, to stand together and overcome the ecclesiastical division in Germany. Only a unified church could bring real unification, the author concluded. It is clearly evident from this and former examples that the conservatives were aware of the early racial discourse that was developing in Germany since the Vormärz. Yet they found the racial criteria inauthentic and thus an inappropriate denominator of the German people.

For the conservatives, the importance of religion and unified church as defining national identity had traditional meanings. The acknowledgment of the Christian faith and the role of the church in crystallizing the German people and preserving its consolidation were intended, among other things, to reinforce the political and social ideal in which the conservatives believed. From the mere fact that Christianity was a major component in the collective identity, it was only natural that its followers would support political and social orders that drew their legitimacy and validity from the same religion. Ludwig von Gerlach was the main conservative figure who exemplified the combination between ecumenical Christianity and the German identity in the post-revolution years. He believed that understanding the importance of religion in the state’s life was a precondition for defining its national peculiarity. Gerlach found the unique features of the state and its mission in the Christian faith itself, not necessarily in Catholicism or
Protestantism. The German nation, according to Gerlach, was not a nation in the same sense as, for example, the English or the French ones. The German is a ‘citizen of the world’ (*Weltbürger*), a ‘member in the Kingdom of God’ (*Genosse des Reiches Gottes*), which is also his homeland. For Gerlach, this was the special trait of the German people – a trait endowed in it by God and characterizing it throughout history, thus destining it to a special mission.\(^65\)

Gerlach’s argument is an example of the special criteria that the conservatives developed regarding the definition of the German national identity. In a dialectical manner, they turned universal, all-Christian ideas into ideas with peculiar German significance. With this conceptual framework, it was possible to create a synthesis between the need to define a particular national identity and the desire to preserve the traditional political and social order; between abstention from accepting principles of political independence and sovereignty of the people, and the emphasis that all Germans constitute a people with a different Christian identity. Gerlach opposed the liberal idea of nationalism, arguing that the fact that Germany was a nation was by no means only because it was composed of German-speaking people.\(^66\) For the same reason, he opposed the national unification of Germany without Austria, which for him was an essential part of greater Germany. The exclusion of Austria from a German union in the war of 1866 was one of the main reasons for the breach between him and Bismarck.\(^67\)

However, still other conservatives held different views regarding Austria and the crisis of 1866, and took a more Prussian patriotic line.\(^68\) Later on, in 1867, the conservative faction in the Reichstag issued a proclamation for the election of the Prussian Landtag where they expressed their resolution to win for Germany all that Prussia had acquired: a sacred belief in God who created all and would affirm its completion.\(^69\) The establishment of the Northern German Federation in 1867 and the German Reich in 1871 made the idea of a unified church as a central feature in German identity less and less relevant. Moreover, the fusion between Protestantism and German nationalism became ever tighter until the creation of the so-called ‘National Protestantism’ that was a dominant feature in German identity in the years following national unification. The close association between German culture and the Reformation looked essential and natural to the special character of the German Reich.\(^70\) These developments nourished the anti-Catholic tendency which worsened until it developed into a cultural conflict, a *Kulturkampf*. The conservatives, although many of them opposed Bismarck’s version of national unification, gradually accommodated to the new Reich while trying to lend it ideological and religious legitimacy, according to the Protestant tradition, and by emphasizing the hegemonic status of Prussia.
Conclusions

Since the 1830s, Prussian conservatives had been aware of the importance of defining collective national identity. In an age of social disintegration and political changes, the formulation of such an identity could not have remained in the hands of their rivals, the liberals. The latter endeavoured to create a national identity according to modern political and social criteria. They were obliged to stir up and revitalize old and new focuses of identity and blend them together in order to provide the people with a new kind of identity. The conservatives, by contrast, took the most basic and authentic social patterns, religious beliefs and traditions — the same patterns and traditions that were universal in their essence — and transformed them into specific features of German identity. The German family as the model for the German society, and the special religious devotion and destiny of the Germans, were the main denominators of the national identity. At the same time, conservatives formulated alternative meanings for nationalism and the way it should be materialized. Through such definitions, conservatives could have satisfied the modern need for new collective identity while escaping the dangerous consequences of modern nationalism and preserving the most sacred values and appropriate political and social order that suited their worldview and needs.

These definitions also shed more light on the background of the conservatives’ potential answer to the national question in Germany well before 1871. However, by using religion and traditional patterns as their most important categories, conservatives lent German national identity at this historical stage some moral features that differentiated it from the later pseudo-scientific and racial elements often ascribed to it. Well towards the end of the century, the legitimate justification of the nineteenth-century conservative version of national identity served as a barrier against unchristian and immoral features. In the name of such principles, to take one example, they opposed the racial anti-Semitism of the 1880s and 1890s as being unchristian and unrespectable, and even warned against the massacre such attitudes might lead to; they did this, however, without refraining from using traditional anti-Semitic expressions.71 Taking all these features into consideration, it seems that nineteenth-century German conservatism cannot serve as a prologue to the extremist ideologies of the 1930s.

Notes


6. Ruetz, op. cit., 76–83. In this regard Ruetz analyses the idea of the dynastic aspect of political and constitutional authority, as manifested in the conservatives’ idea of nationalism. However, he hardly addresses the essence of the national identity as prescribed by the conservatives since the *Vormärz*.


9. Samuel Huntington describes this definition of conservatism as ‘aristocratic theory’, which differs from the ‘autonomic theory’ and the ‘situational theory’. Huntington criticizes the first theory since conservatism, according to his argument, is not embraced solely by the aristocracy. The second theory, the autonomic, is a set of ideas which includes feudalism, traditionalism and rejection of abstract and metaphysic ideals. Since it lacks a vision for the future it cannot be considered as an ideology. Therefore, Huntington prefers the situational theory of conservatism which interprets conservatism as an ideology that appears whenever the existing institutions of state and society are threatened. When the threat is over the ideology loses its relevancy. See Samuel P. Huntington, ‘Conservatism as an Ideology’, in The American Political Science Review, vol. 51 (1957), 454–73.


11. See, for example, Greiffenhagen, op. cit., 18–19; Schildt, op. cit., 27.


17. See the following discussions: Schmitt, op. cit., 25–7; Otto Dann, Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland 1770–1990 (Munich 1996), 69–70. For further treatment of German romanticism, especially that of Novalis and Friedrich Schelegel, see Meinecke, op. cit., 58–83. See also Frederick C. Beiser, The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism (Cambridge MA 2003). 35–9.


19. In Meinecke’s analysis of Müller’s thought, he points out the political meaning he attached to
Prussia as a nation. This, however, does not refer to the discussion above. See Meinecke, op. cit., 113–41.

20. Such a meaning of the word appears, for example, in the translations of the Scottish historian and philosopher from late eighteenth century, Adam Ferguson, into German. There, the word community is translated into the word Staat in German. See Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford 1995), 108.


26. On the disagreements between Stahl and the other conservatives see: Schoeps, op. cit., 56–77; Kraus, Gerlach, 287–8; Füßel, op. cit., 188.

27. Stahl, *Philosophie*, vol. 2; Zweite Abtheilung, 18–19 (all the next references are from this edition). See also the later version of this book: Friedrich Julius Stahl, *Die Staatslehre und die Principien des Staatsrechts* (Heidelberg 1856), 205.


29. Ibid., 249–50. See also Grosser, op. cit., 88.


32. See the extensive discussion in Vick, ibid., 110–75, and also James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago 1987), 49–50, 70–1; Jörn Leonhard,


38. NPZ, N. 172 (28.7.1849) 'Was ist eigentlich das deutsche Volk?'.


40. The conservative religious newspaper, Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung (EKZ), edited by the Prussian theologian Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, expressed a very similar view regarding the role of the family in defining the special German identity: EKZ, N. 18 (3.3.1869) 'Die specielle Selsorge'. On the overall concern expressed by conservatives regarding the disintegration of the traditional order of society and the ways to deal with the 'Social Question' see Beck, op. cit., 31–122.

41. At the end of the article series mentioned above, the BR also could not escape the conservative conclusion that the state is the most powerful framework which holds society together: BR, 1867, vol. 51, 'Die Staatsangehörigkeit ist kein Kennzeichen der Nationalität', 10–11.


44. Altgeld, ibid., 58. 168–71. For a detailed discussion of the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism regarding nationalism see 158–81. On the views of specific thinkers about the connection between nationalism and Christianity see Koppel S. Pinson, Pietism as a Factor in the Rise of German Nationalism (New York 1934), 16–103.


47. Kraus, Gerlach, 165–73; Schildt, op. cit., 54–9.


51. Ibid., 239–40.

52. Friedrich Julius Stahl, Der christliche Staat und sein Verhältniß zu Deismus und Judenthum (Berlin 1847), 5, 9.

53. Ibid., 15–14.


56. Ibid., 27–8.

57. Ibid., 60.


59. Vick, op. cit., 45–5. For the national importance of the Holy Roman Empire in an earlier period see Dann, Nation und Nationalismus, 63.

60. EKZ, N.90 (8.11.1848) ‘Das Jahr 1648 und 1848’.

61. NPZ, N.172 (28.7.1849) ‘Was ist eigentlich das deutsche Volk?’.

62. On St Bonifacius see Altgeld, op. cit., 164, 181.

63. NPZ, N.173 (29.7.1849) ‘Was ist eigentlich das deutsche Volk? (Schluß)’. On the correlation between the German national identity and Christianity, as appeared in the conservative discussion since the beginning of the nineteenth century, see Sterling, op. cit., 118–27. Helmut Berding, Moderner Antisemitismus in Deutschland (Frankfurt am Main 1988), 44–51. Sterling and Berding, however, analyse this subject from the perspective of conservative anti-Semitism.

64. Regarding the early discussion in Germany about racial features see Sterling, op. cit., 139–43.

65. Quoted in Kraus, Gerlach, 254–5, see also Schoeps, op. cit., 43–55 (especially 48).

66. NPZ, N.1 (5.1.1849) ‘Rundschau zu Neujahr 1849’. See also Orr, op. cit., 201.


68. Such tones were expressed by the more nationalistic conservative newspaper, the Neues Allgemeines Volksblatt (NAV). See NAV, N.137 (15.6.1866) ‘An die Wähler des preußischen Volkes’; NAV, N.141 (20.6.1866) ‘Mitbürger’. See also Gerhard Ritter, Die Preußischen Konservativen und Bismarcks deutsche Politik 1858–1871 (Heidelberg 1913), 136–40. A relatively new and interesting discussion about the attitude of the moderate conservative party, the Freikonservative Partei, towards the Catholics at the period is found in Stalmann, op. cit., 94–9. After the Kulturkampf, this party became increasingly more Protestant in its personal composition and relationship to Catholics. See Matthias Alexander, Die Freikonservative Partei 1890–1918. Gemäßigter Konservatismus in der konstitutionellen Monarchie (Düsseldorf 2000), 157–8.

70. In this regard see Peter Walkenhorst, ‘Nationalismus als Politische Religion? Zur religiösen
Dimension Nationalistischer Ideologie im Kaiserreich’ in Olaf Blaschke and Frank-Michael

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