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Introduction

The Thirty Years' War! What a fateful epoch for Germany, an epoch of the most fanatical and savage conflict, a bloody time of religious war, whose flame was lit in Bohemia in 1618 to rage through Germany with devastation and fire for a quarter of a century. Misery without parallel spread from the Baltic to the Danube. We see ancient and rich provinces afflicted by the fury of rebellion, the bonds of government torn asunder, only to be restored with blood and iron—a time filled with shame and horror!

This advertisement appeared on the end sheet of Luise Mühlbach's *Die Opfer des religiösen Fanatismus: Historischer Roman aus dem dreißigjährigen Krieg* (The Victims of Religious Fanaticism: A Historical Novel of the Thirty Years' War) (1871–72). The publisher, Sigmund Bensinger, was clearly not promising light reading for Mühlbach's devoted fans throughout German-speaking Central Europe. Bensinger knew what his audience wanted.¹ Mühlbach's novel was part of a tremendous flood of histories, plays, novels, poems, and “rediscovered” memoirs and documents dealing with the Thirty Years' War that appeared in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. In an era that saw the birth of German nationalism and the unification of Germany as a powerful nation-state, the reading public's obsession with the most destructive and divisive war in German history is a remarkable example of the interplay between collective memory, history, and national identity. This interplay is the distinguishing characteristic of nationalist thinking as it evolved in the nineteenth century. But what is remarkable about the German case is that a story of defeat and humiliation should exert such influence on an emerging national consciousness.² This should draw the histori-

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an's attention immediately, since national narratives are conventionally understood as stories of triumph. At first glance there seems to be very little to celebrate in the events and outcome of the Thirty Years' War. This catastrophe overshadowed every milestone of Germany's progress toward nationhood and European and global power: 1813, 1866, 1871, 1917, and 1941. Yet the collective memory of this seventeenth-century war shaped every debate in the nineteenth century over the ideal form of the German nation.

There are many reasons for the Germans' morbid fascination with the Thirty Years' War. The popularity of Gustav Freytag's *Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit* (Pictures from the German Past) and Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (both appearing in countless versions and reprintings) was based in part on pride in how far Germany had come in overcoming the material destruction and political weakness the war had left in its wake. Interest in the war was also stimulated by the midcentury apotheosis of Friedrich Schiller as the German national poet. His interpretation of the Thirty Years' War as a struggle for German liberty led to a new appreciation of the work as one of the key texts influencing the creation of a national German history. Finally, Prussian historians used Germany's degradation in the war as a way to further mythologize the Hohenzollern triumph in 1871. Why did the argument over the meaning of the war become so violent, prolonged, and partisan? Why were the battles of the "Great War" of the seventeenth century fought again, in popular remembrance, history, and literature, in the nineteenth? After two hundred years, the unresolved issues that had originally sparked the conflict lingered in collective memory as obstacles to German unification. Germany's rediscovery of the war in the nineteenth century was ultimately driven by a need to overcome those obstacles through a new understanding of the war as the decisive political event that shaped modern Germany.

As Germans looked cautiously forward to political unification in the mid-nineteenth century, the popular memory of the Thirty Years' War, the presence of a past that refused to pass, caused them to look over their shoulders constantly. Germans relived the Thirty Years' War as that "sad, joyless time," in Gustav Freytag's words, and the defining episode of the German tragedy. To fully understand the broad accep-

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tance of Prussian leadership of German unification, the issues at the center of the “greater Germany–little Germany” (*Großdeutschland/Kleindeutschland*) debate, and the cultural and political marginalization of Germany’s Catholics, we must understand how and why the Thirty Years’ War haunted German memory in the nineteenth century. To understand the clash between the Protestant and Catholic visions of a unified Germany, one must understand how Germans reconceptualized the experience of war for partisan purposes. Their rediscovery of the Thirty Years’ War in the nineteenth century shaped a concept of German national development that, for all its secular nationalist trajectory, explicitly relied on confessional allegiance as the definitive criterion of what it meant to be German. The experience of total war itself was integrated within these narratives as a decisive factor in the formation of German national identity. One remarkable feature of these histories is a tendency to characterize war in religious terms, as the sacrifice demanded to fulfill the covenant between God and his chosen people. This covenant promised nationhood—not just in unification but in ascendancy to European and global power, a conviction that was fundamental to the harsh faith of German nationalism. Such faith would demand the martyrdom of Germans in the twentieth century and, ultimately, the sacrifice of millions who were not German. At the end of his novel *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann looked back on nineteenth-century Germany’s troubled rise to nationhood and the ruin of that nation under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, and wondered about the origins of what he called the “blood state.”³ By studying Germany’s confrontation with the meaning of the Thirty Years’ War in the nineteenth century, we can add to our understanding of how and why the foundations of the blood state were laid.

Extracting meaning from this seventeenth-century catastrophe was a violently polemical process that reveals much about how the give and take between history writing and collective memory shaped the discipline in Germany. In the *Historical Journal* in 1865, Bernhard Erdmannsdörffer, a prominent scholar of the constitutional history of the German states, observed how bitter and divisive the argument over the meaning of the Thirty Years’ War had become:

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We stand in the midst of a struggle between new political and religious factions. Admittedly, they are not the same old debates from the past. However, in looking back on former times, we return to their common origins and old formulas of opposition and again fan the flames of ancient discords as if, in pronouncing on the right or wrong of past positions, we are passing judgment on the faults or merits of our own endeavors. These days scarcely a line can be written on this subject without the implicit or explicit aim of attack or defense. Our entire literature in this area has become polemical—less in regard to the confirmation or disputation of individual facts than in the general view of the motivations and values of the men and parties under discussion.⁴

Erdmannsdörffer's criticisms sum up the state of mind of German historians in the nineteenth century as they attempted to construct a coherent German history that had the gravitas of the histories of France and Britain. Given the historiographical conventions of the era, and given Germany's history of weakness and disunity (and thus a lack of a unifying secular identity), this meant reworking a story of religious and civil war into a founding act of revolutionary violence.

After the defeat of Napoleon in the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig in 1813, a novel feeling of national pride and solidarity swept through the German states. Germany's debilitating confessional and political fragmentation seemed banished forever by the unifying war of liberation against imperial France. Napoleon's dissolution of the moribund Holy Roman Empire and his creation of the Confederation of the Rhine also seemed, for many, to point the way toward a unified German nation. A new sense of national community, at least among an increasingly assertive *Bildungsbürgertum*, was born in this war. The sudden vision of political unity that followed in its wake naturally stimulated a desire for a national history. Where could Germans find the epochal conflict that had laid the foundation for the development of the modern state and disclosed the connecting historical thread to 1813? The glory of eternal France was manifest in the story of the rise of the expansionist Bourbon monarchy under Louis XIV, reborn in the millenarian hope of 1789 and in the Napoleonic imperial myth, which melded the two ideas of France. The Whig tradition in English history writing

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traced the triumph of parliamentary government from the disunity of the Wars of the Roses through the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. German historians certainly tried to interpret the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon as a crusade or revolutionary war that had led to the birth of a modern nationalist consciousness. The history of the Reformation offered a possible basis for a national narrative based on the idea of the Protestant struggle to liberate Germany from the tyranny of Rome. However, this nascent Protestant nationalism, essential to the conviction that it was Prussia's mission to fulfill the promise of German greatness, would not find its footing unless and until it could be grounded in some idea of a territorial state. It was not until the 1860s, when Prussian history writing connected the rise of the Hohenzollerns with German unification, that a viable (though not uncontested) German national history seemed possible. But in the period before 1871 this approach appealed mainly to those already convinced of the inevitability (and desirability) of Prussian leadership of unification. Its assumptions were less convincing to those who envisioned alternative unitary schemes that challenged Prussian and Austrian domination of the German Confederation.

What is noteworthy about this struggle to create a unifying history is that German historians used the story of the Thirty Years' War, the most divisive and humiliating episode in modern German history, as the matrix within which a compelling story of the German rise to unity, nationhood, and power could be presented. Reconstructing histories of the Thirty Years' War gave historians the opportunity to reflect on a German event in the relatively recent past that had become just distant enough to permit the drawing of conclusions about its significance. In its diplomatic, territorial, ideological, and political consequences for Germany, the war was seen to have prefigured the epochal transformations put in play by the French Revolution. In comparing the great seventeenth-century upheaval with that of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, German historians identified the Thirty Years' War as the most decisive and formative conflict in the long and halting progress toward German nationhood.

The divide between Catholic and Protestant made this past a bitterly

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contested ground. No aspect of the German religious schism offered a more compelling forum for debating the political, cultural, and psychological consequences of the Reformation than the history of the Thirty Years' War. The confessional division turned history writing about the war into a clash between two epics of victimization, one Protestant and one Catholic. Protestant historians insisted on the religious origins of the conflict as they reconceptualized the war as part of a longer struggle against foreign rule, beginning with the Reformation, for German liberty. By presenting Habsburg rule as a Jesuit tyranny directed from Rome and enforced by barbaric foreign mercenaries, they could point to the war as a justification for a Germany unified under Prussian (and Protestant) leadership, the *kleindeutsch* idea that excluded Austria and consigned Catholics to second-class status in the national community. Catholic historians defended the Habsburg Counter-Reformation as a struggle to preserve, modernize, and expand the imperial constitutional state as the historically legitimate defender of German culture and civilization. They believed that the war conclusively demonstrated the desirability of a Germany organized along confederal lines, a constitutional model partially realized in the German Confederation. This *großdeutsch* idea also implied a reincarnation of the Holy Roman Empire that included Austria. As German political and historical thought in the nineteenth century attempted to define a modern idea of the nation, this *kleindeutsch/großdeutsch* argument was at the core of every political and cultural discussion about Germany's destiny as a unified nation.

The historians' arguments over the lessons of the war reflected a more general uncertainty among educated Germans over what, exactly, "Germany" had been or was meant to be. Heine's observation that in Germany there was no present, only a past and a future, perfectly captured their anxiety over this question. At the heart of the debate over the meaning of the Thirty Years' War was a fractious exchange between Catholic and Protestant. Both sides attempted to explain the meaning of German suffering and the reasons for Germany's long exile from the promised land of nationhood. Of course, an important justification for the discipline of history in the nineteenth century was an abiding belief in the power of a national narrative to develop and strengthen allegiance

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to the nation-state. The difficulty in this particular case was reconciling Germany's laggard progress toward unification, generally understood as a consequence of the Thirty Years' War, with the triumphant narrative required to solidify that allegiance. It was obviously difficult for German historians to substantively challenge the conventional view that this catastrophic and divisive war, and the peace settlement that confirmed German division, were the first chapters of modern Germany's problematic story. Another problem was that this history of civil war and foreign intervention undermined any claim to great power status. The solution was to reimagine the confessional conflict that sparked the war in epic terms that resonated in the nineteenth-century historical imagination. The story of the Thirty Years' War was refashioned into an epochal confrontation between the forces of reaction and liberty, legitimacy and revolution. German historians raised the stakes of this confrontation into nothing less than the future constitutional and territorial shape of Germany. The human, material, and psychological losses of the war were surveyed in detail as explanations for Germany's continually interrupted progress toward becoming a nation. Nineteenth-century Germany's remembrance of the Thirty Years' War became a cathartic national confrontation with the constitutional, ideological, and spiritual assumptions that underlay modern German identity.⁵ The development of history as a professionalized and scientific discipline in the nineteenth century justified this process. In their books Macaulay, Buckle, Michelet, and Thierry conspicuously celebrated the role of transcendent principles, manifested in various heroic and inspiring episodes, in creating the modern British and French nations. It is useful to bear in mind that historians were, as Eugen Weber writes, "the clerisy of the nineteenth century because it fell to them to rewrite foundational myths; and history was the theology of the nineteenth century because it provided societies cast loose from the moorings of custom and habit with new anchorage in a rediscovered—or reinvented—past."⁶ For their part, German historians of the Thirty Years' War revealed the crucial connection between confessional allegiance and national identity and how it had contributed to Germany's present "unfinished" status.

Certainly, this was not the *only* way Germans read their history, but

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but this religiously inflected interpretation of German national development, revealed in the commemoration and cultural remembrance of the Thirty Years' War, consistently employed biblical narrative tropes of "chosen-ness" in descriptions of sacrifice and the extirpative wrath of God. The fear of the nation's annihilation was always present. But out of the chaos of war a new order, a renewal, and rebirth would always be possible. If, as Heinrich von Srbik suggests, German idealist philosophy politicized history and historicized politics in the nineteenth century, perhaps these tendencies can be partially explained as attempts to impose meaning on the chaos of revolution and war. Srbik's intuition is reflected in the work of historians Georg Iggers and Bernd Faulenbach, who have examined the idealist roots of German political thought as a key influence on a militantly nationalist historiography.⁷ Iggers's classic study, *The German Conception of History*, identified the strains of philosophical idealism found in the methodological assumptions of German *Historismus*. Embodied in the work of the so-called Prussian School, it articulated a notion of political order based on the waging of war to make and preserve the state.⁸ Faulenbach's work on the ideological functions of history writing also attempts to explain how these premises drove a process of historical self-interpretation that easily and willingly lent itself to an authoritarian concept of the state.⁹ Iggers and Faulenbach take a biographical approach to the study of German history writing that focuses on the links between idealist philosophy, philosophies of history, and various ideological commitments of historians to a vision of the nation. This interpretation was firmly established in Franz X. von Wegele's *Geschichte der deutschen Historiographie* (History of German Historiography) (1885), Eduard Feuter's *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (History of Modern Historiography) (1911), Georg von Below's *Die deutsche Geschichtschreibung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zu unsern Tagen* (German History Writing from the Wars of Liberation to the Present Day) (1916), and Moriz Ritter's *Die Entwicklung der Geschichtswissenschaft an den führenden Werken betrachtet* (The Development of the Science of History) (1919).¹⁰ Given the prominent cultural and political role historians played in the Second Reich, this approach is logical and remains useful.¹¹ The consensus is that the

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tenets of philosophical idealism, manifested in philosophies of history, encouraged a dangerous eschatological attitude in German nationalism, which was especially noticeable in a general historical fascination with war. Otto Hintze ruefully acknowledged this in 1915 when he quoted an English writer to the effect that “Prussian history is endlessly boring because it speaks so much of war and so little of revolution.”¹² The result has been an extensive literature on the historical thinking and influence of Kant, Herder, Hegel, and Schiller. These studies provide the background for other works that examine the intemperate collisions of historical scholarship, nationalism, and politics that continuously disturbed German academic life in the nineteenth century.¹³ Disputes over methodologies, sources, and political agendas invariably degenerated into the open questioning of opponents’ allegiance to the nation. This Teutonic turmoil was as much a part of the nineteenth-century writing dealing with the Thirty Years’ War as it was of the twentieth-century arguments over certain continuities and discontinuities in German history, most notably in the Fischer controversy in the 1960s over twentieth-century German war aims and the historians’ debate (*Historikerstreit*) of the 1980s over “normalizing” the Holocaust.¹⁴

By focusing on the philosophical and ideological energies driving the ascent of the Prussian School, historians have missed some opportunities to explore the deeper connections between history, politics, and national identity in nineteenth-century Germany. There have been few studies examining the pull of specific episodes in German history (other than those that glorify the rise of the Hohenzollerns, such as German unification) on historians’ imaginations.¹⁵ How do historians come to choose and shape the subjects and themes of their narratives? This is an important question. National histories are both a catalyst and a by-product of the rise of the nation-state, and they are made to compel allegiance and solidarity.¹⁶ Historians of history writing are studying the historical debates over the meaning of the transformative episodes of violence in the life of a nation: war, revolution, and mass death. Their work has produced a significant body of scholarship on the most interpreted event of the modern era of history writing, the French Revolution, followed closely by studies of the historical interpretations

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of the seventeenth-century British civil war, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, and the Holocaust.¹⁷ This innovative scholarship demonstrates that if we truly want to understand the place of history writing in the cultural and intellectual life of a nation, we must take a page from Voltaire and ask what tricks the living have played on the dead. We can recover an era's passionate belief in the meaning of the past by showing how historians' topical choices are closely linked to contemporary political and ideological concerns.¹⁸ Frank Ankersmit points to these links when he emphasizes that historical narratives function by distinguishing "between what *did* happen and what *might* have happened but *did not*." The "what-if questions" raised by this groping toward meaning must, it seems to me, reveal something of supreme importance.¹⁹ Nineteenth-century histories of the Thirty Years' War were not only about the war; they were also arguments about the past, present, and future of the German nation. The presence of this seventeenth-century war in the nineteenth century was felt in the ever-present fear of war, revolution, occupation, and dissolution that turned every dispute over the proper interpretation of the war into a debate over the possibility of German nationhood. The authors of these histories were convinced that the story of the Thirty Years' War, in showing what might have happened but did not, captured the essence of Germany's struggle toward nationhood, a tragic and frustrating cycle of *becoming*, and also showed the way to breaking that cycle.

The significance of nineteenth-century German history writing about the Thirty Years' War lies in the clash between two competing historical vocabularies, one Protestant, one Catholic, which tried to impose coherence on, and extract meaning from, the defeats and discontinuities of Germany's struggle to unify.²⁰ The narratives constructed from these vocabularies, stories of sacrifice and redemption, promised fulfillment of the German aspiration to unity. These stories were painful to tell, but they allowed Germans to understand the Thirty Years' War as an epic struggle to make the nation. For the first time Germans could begin to see their country's past as something other than an obscure and mystifying chaos. The injunction to sacrifice, the fundamental idea behind the historical consciousness of the West (and modern nationalism), is

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the reason the past weighs so heavily on the present. Modern history writing, in the service of nationalism, adopted for secular ends the story of Abraham leading Isaac to the altar. This command to sacrifice is what made the German debates over the meaning of the Thirty Years' War so violent and uncompromising. It lay beneath all arguments over the political form of the nation. Disputing the veracity of the national narrative dishonored the sacrifices of the dead and invited the punishment of occupation, partition, and enslavement. Michel de Certeau sees in these debates "the presence of the dead who still haunt the present . . . [that] phantasm of historiography, the object that it seeks, honors, buries." For Certeau, history writing evolved to provide the state with the moral authority to command obedience.²¹ It animates institutions with ideas that are worth dying for, a function once the domain of religious, theological, and philosophical writings. Defining and articulating those ideas drove the professionalization of the discipline of history (and the rise in its intellectual status) in the nineteenth century. German disunity made this definition and articulation an overriding obligation for German historians and led to a bitter confrontation between two historical-moral genealogies and two ideas of the German nation-state.

This book explores the reasons for this clash as it arose out of the connections between the experience of war, historical and collective memory, religious division, and German national identity. It examines a century of history writing in the work of over two hundred historians contained in some four hundred texts, augmented by reviews, criticism, memoirs, letters, speeches, and political and religious writings. The most intense debate over the interpretation of the Thirty Years' War occurred during the period between the Wars of Liberation and the Wars of Unification, that is, between the 1820s, when the grip of Metternich's Restoration tightened on the German Confederation, and the 1860s, when Prussia emerged as the presumptive leader of German unification. The Confederation regimes gradually clamped down on open demonstrations of German nationalism, and vigorous political debate about the shape of a unified German nation was driven underground. As a result, public discourse on the unification question mainly came under the influence of Germany's historians. The narrative of the war