



Source: Th. Mommsen, D.F. Strauss, Fr. Max Müller & Th. Carlyle
Letters on the War between Germany and France (London: Trübner & Co., 1871)
pp. 41-47 (online at www.archive.org)



Open letter to Ernest Renan

David Friedrich Strauss¹

D. F. STRAUSS

August 18th, 1870.

Dear Sir,—Your friendly acceptance of my work on Voltaire, conveyed to me in your letter of the 30th ult., was a great comfort to me. The book met with a generally favourable reception in Germany, during the few weeks vouchsafed to it from its first appearance to the breaking out of the war; but I had never concealed from myself the difficulties a foreigner has to cope with

in trying to do justice to a man of another nation, especially if that man must be called the very embodiment of the foreign nationality. I awaited, therefore, with some uneasiness the judgments of the leaders of opinion among Voltaire's countrymen. That yours has turned out in favour of my work, makes me right glad; at all events the truthfulness which you concede to it has been my sole endeavour.

But who can take pleasure in a literary work, and especially a work for international peace, as my 'Life of Voltaire' was intended to be, at a moment when the two nations to whose union it was meant to contribute stand in arms against one another? Rightly do you say that this war must cause the deepest distress to all those who have striven for the intellectual association of France and Germany; rightly do you describe it as a calamity that now again for a long time to come injustice and uncharitable judgment will be the order of the day between the two members of the European family whose sympathy is so indispensable to the work of moral civilization; rightly do you declare it to be the duty of every friend of truth and justice, at the same time that he unreservedly fulfils his national duty, to preserve himself free from that patriotism which is only party spirit—which narrows the heart and perverts the judgment.

You say that you had hoped that the war might still have been stayed. We Germans had the same hope in every case since 1866 when war seemed to threaten; yet in general we have held a war with France as a consequence of the events of that year to be inevitable,—so inevitable, that here and there one heard the question asked with dissatisfaction, "Why did not Prussia declare war sooner, for instance on occasion of the Luxemburg affair, and so bring things to an issue?" Not that we wished for war; but we knew the French well enough to know that they

¹ Strauss and Renan were both famous for their positivistic approach to the life of Christ. Renan had sent Strauss a private letter on 30 July, to which Strauss responded with the present text, published as an open letter in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* (18 August; the present English version was published in the *Daily Mail*). Renan had a French version, as well as his rejoinder, published in the *Journal des Débats* (18-19 September), and at the same time published an article in the *Revue de Deux Mondes* to which Strauss responded in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* (2 October). Renan's reply appeared almost a year later, on 19 September 1871; much later, the altercation was to re-surface in Renan's *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* [SPIN note]



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would wish for war. It is now as it was with the Seven Years' War, the consequence of the Silesian conquests of Frederick the Great. Frederick did not desire that war, but he knew that Maria Theresa desired it, and would not rest till she had found confederates. An established ascendancy is not readily renounced either by a monarch or a people. They will make efforts to preserve it until it is decisively taken from them. So was it with Austria, so is it now with France: both of them against Prussia, by whose side the whole of non-Austrian Germany, better instructed, is this time standing.

Since the epoch of Richelieu and Louis XIV France has been accustomed to play the first *rôle* among European nations, and in this claim she was strengthened by Napoleon I. The claim was based on her strong politico-military organization, and still more on the classical literature which in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had grown up in France, and made her language and her culture supreme in the world. But the immediate condition of this supremacy of France was the weakness of Germany; over against France united, unanimous, and quick to move, Germany stood divided, discordant, and unwieldy. Yet, every nation has its time, and, if it is of the right sort, not one time alone. Germany had had its time in the sixteenth century, in the age of the Reformation. It had paid dearly for this preeminence in the convulsions of a thirty years' war, which threw it back, not only into political feebleness, but into intellectual stagnation. Yet things were far from having come to an end with it. It saw its time again. It began its work where France had fixed the roots, not indeed of its power, but of its true right to European ascendancy. It fashioned itself in silence; it produced a literature; it gave to the world a succession of poets and thinkers, who took their place by the side of the French classics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as something more than equals. If in finish of cosmopolitan understanding and cultivation, in clearness and elegance,

they fell short of the French, in depth of thought as much as in strength of feeling they surpassed them. The idea of humanity, of the harmonious cultivation of human nature in individual as in common life, was developed in German literature in the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth and the first twenty-five years of the nineteenth century.

The result of this was that Germany won the intellectual leadership of Europe, while France still maintained its political ascendancy, though latterly in hard struggle with England. But the literary outburst of Germany was either fruitless bloom, or it was destined to be followed, by political regeneration. In the time of Napoleon, France had laid Germany prostrate before her; the yoke was thrown off in the war of liberation of 1813-14. But the ground of our powerlessness, the want of political unity, was not removed; on the contrary, if the German empire had long been nothing but a shadow, now even the shadow had vanished. Germany had become a motley aggregate of greater and smaller independent States. This independence itself may have been a mere show, but it was yet real enough to make all energetic action of the whole body impossible; while, on the other hand, the "Bundestag" which had to represent the unity, made its existence discernible in nothing but the repression of all free movement in the individual States. If France was again taken with the humour to aggrandize itself at our cost, it was not Germany, but Russia and England, that had to restrain it. This was keenly felt in Germany. It was felt by the men who had fought in the Liberation War, who, during the dismal years of reaction, saw quite another seed spring up than that which they were conscious of having sown; it was felt by the young men who had grown up in the thoughts and the songs of these wars. Thus it was that strivings after unity during the succeeding time had something very youthful, immature, and romantic about them. The German idea



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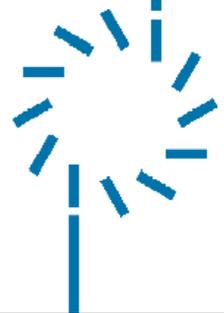


haunted them as a familiar—as the Ghost of the Old Emperor. That the Governments of the time attached so great importance to the students' clubs and democratic machinations, as they were called, only showed how bad their conscience was.

The storm of your July Revolution cleared our atmosphere to some degree, without carrying us essentially forward. There was now too much attention paid to a nation differently constituted; for every people first of all must look to its own work, to its own nature and history. In the Chambers of our smaller States there was life enough; many robust forces were aroused, but the narrow range of their activity made their horizon equally narrow. As Prussia and Austria remained closed to constitutional life, and held together in opposing its spread in the smaller States, in these latter hostility to the Bundestag, the pitiful remnant of German unity, passed for patriotism. Indeed, it could not long be concealed that nothing could come of spirited speeches in the small States, so long as their Governments could fall back upon the Bundestag, — that is, upon the two absolute leading States. Thoughts of a representation of the people in the Bund were floating; in Prussia a hopeful, if imperfect step was being taken in the meeting of the united "Landtag," when for the second time an impulse from your country—the February Revolution—struck into the course of German development. These French influences were dangerous for us only so long as they found us weak. In proportion as we gained internal strength they became more and more desirable; so that this last, which was thought to be most unfortunate for us, is to-day bringing to our view more auspicious consequences than all earlier ones. The impulse of 1848 came upon us at a moment when in each of the German States men had come to be convinced of the fruitlessness of all separate strivings for freedom and popular well-being, and at one stroke it forced the idea of German unity to the surface. In the German Parliament, elected by the general vote, this thought gained for the first time a political

organ, before whose moral authority all existing individual powers had for some time to fall into the background. But if, during the twenty years of reaction, the idea of German unity had had its life principally among our students, then the scoffers might say that in 1848 it had passed to the professors,—and so far at least with truth, as in every educated German, according to the common expression, there is something of a professor. Enough; the thing was set going very thoroughly in theory, but also very unpractically. In fencing about principles of right, and debating over paragraphs of the constitution, invaluable time was lost, till, unobserved, the actual Powers had regained their strength, and the ideal fabric of a new Germany dissolved like a castle in the clouds.

From such any heights the German imperial throne had been offered to a Prince who, although in other respects a man of the clouds, had yet so much true insight that he could neither believe himself to be the right man for the crown nor the crown itself to be a possibility. The attempts which he then made to appropriate some part of what had been offered to him ended even more pitifully than the attempt of the German people to constitute itself anew. In the course of these struggles the dualism of Austria and Prussia had more and more brought itself before men's eyes as the essential misfortune of Germany. During Metternich's time Prussia had been kept in tow by Austria, and this had been thought the guarantee of all order and security. Its present attempts, each more earnest than the last, to have its own will and to carry out its own proper aims, were not less disagreeable than novel to Austrian policy. Whatever, therefore, from this time onwards was undertaken or promoted in Germany by Prussia, beginning with the Zollverein, was both secretly and openly opposed by Austria. Germany fell into the condition of a waggon with one horse before and another of equal strength pulling behind, with



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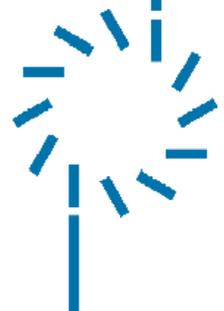
no hope of moving. But the times educate their men, provided that among the young growth there are characters of the right stuff, and that these find themselves in their right places. Herr von Bismarck was a man of such stuff, and in his position in the Bundestag in Frankfort, he was in the right place for penetrating into the inmost seat of Germany's weakness. It was indeed his Prussian pride which swore revenge upon Austria for the humiliations which she had destined for Prussia; but in this he was not unconscious that with Prussia, Germany also would be helped forward. On occasion of the war in Schleswig-Holstein, the phenomenon was for a moment seen of the two horses pulling side by side, yet the end was hardly attained before the old opposition began again. Now was the time to cut the traces which fastened the hinder horse to the waggon; it would then be an easy task for the other to move it forward. A true Columbus egg, this thought! It would have seemed that every one must have shared it; yet there was but one man—if the thought was not his alone—who conceived the true means to carry it into effect.

In the life of nations, as of individuals, there are times when that which we have long wished and striven for presents itself to us in so strange a shape that we recognize it not, and even turn away from it in displeasure and resentment. So was it with the Austrian war of 1866 and its consequences. It brought to us Germans what we had so long wished for, but it brought it not in the manner that we had wished, and therefore a great part of the German nation thrust it away from them. We had hoped to work out the unity of Germany from the popular idea, from the popular desire, from the thoughts of its best men. Now it was by the action of the *de facto* Powers, by blood and iron, that we saw the road cut out. We had hoped—so wide and so high had been the range of the idea—to include in one constitution the entire German race. Now as the result of actually present relations, not only the Germans in Austria, but the intermediary South German States, remained

excluded. It needed time to reconcile German idealism, and, perhaps, German obstinacy, with the fact which it found before it; but the might, nay, the reasonableness of this fact was so irresistible, that in the shortest time the better view had made a most happy progress.

That which in no small measure contributed to throw a light even upon the most blinded was the attitude which France took up towards these events. France had let it be seen that she hoped to strengthen her pre-eminence by means of the internal conflicts of her neighbour; when she found herself deceived in this hope she could not disguise her vexation. From this time onwards we Germans could regulate the value we attached to our political relations by the French estimate of them, for their value was exactly the reverse to the one and the other people. The sour looks which France cast on Prussia and the Northern Confederation taught us that in those two lay our safety. Her oglings with the unconfederated South taught us that in the latter lay our greatest weakness. Every movement which Prussia made, not to force the South German States to join it, but merely to keep the door open to them, was suspected by France, and made an occasion of intervention. Even on a question so entirely non-political as the subvention of the Mount St. Gothard Railway, the Gallic cock crowed martially.

Since the fall of Napoleon, France has three times altered its constitution; on none of these occasions did Germany think of interfering. It has always recognized the right of its neighbour to remodel the inside of his house, according to his need or convenience, even according to his caprice. Were our German transactions of 1866, and subsequently, a different matter? Did the panels with which we lined our hitherto notoriously uninhabitable house, the rafters that we strengthened, the walls that we carried up, shake our neighbour's house? Did they



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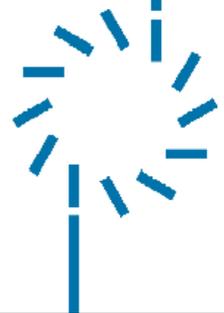


threaten to intercept its light or air? Did they expose it to danger from fire? No such thing! It was simply that our house appeared to him too noble. This neighbour of ours, he wished to possess the finest and highest house in the whole street, and above all, ours should not be too strong. We must not have the means of making it fast; he must never be deprived of the power to do what he had already done several times, of taking possession of a few of our rooms whenever it suited him, and throwing them into his own house. Yet, in remodelling our house we had made no claim whatever to those portions of it which our violent neighbour had appropriated in bygone days, but had left them to him, and given him the right of prescription. But now, indeed, since he has appealed to the sword, these old questions rise up again. France will not give up its European primacy.

Only if it has a right to this, has it a right to interfere with our internal questions? But on what is this pretended right to the primacy based? In cultivation Germany has long placed itself on a level with France. The equal rank of our literature has long been recognized by the representatives of that of France. The just proportion in which, thanks to a well-devised school education, moral and intellectual training have penetrated every class of our people, is envied by the best men among the French. The exclusion of the Reformation from France, greatly as it contributed to strengthen its political power, had an equally great effect in destroying its intellectual and moral well-being. But even in political capacity we have now fully come up to the French, though slowly. The Revolution of 1789 appeared to give them an immense advantage over us. We have to thank it for loosening us from many chains which would otherwise have weighed upon us far into the future; but what we have seen in France since the Revolution has not been of a character to frighten us out of our competition. Limited Governments appear to have come into being only to be undermined, to sink into anarchy, as this, in its

turn, into despotism. Whether Constitutional Monarchy, in which you, no less than myself, recognize the only durable form of Government for Europe (exceptional conditions put aside), can ever strike its roots deep in France, appears to be doubtful to yourself in your admirable essay on the subject; at least it is your wish rather than your hope.

That I am not blind to the many good qualities of the French nation—that I recognize in it an essential and indispensable member of the European national family, a beneficial leaven in their mingling—it is as little necessary that I should assure you, as that you should assure me of the like unperverted estimation of the German people and their merits on your side. But nations, as well as individuals, have, as the reverse side of their merits, not less conspicuous faults; and in relation to these faults, our two nations have for centuries enjoyed a very different, nay, totally opposite, training. We Germans, in the hard school of calamity and dishonour, in which your countrymen in great measure were our relentless schoolmasters and chasteners, have learnt to recognize our essential and hereditary faults under their true form—our visionariness, our slowness, and, above all, our want of unity, as the hindrances of all national success. We have taken ourselves to task, we have striven against these failings, and sought more and more to rid ourselves of them. On the other hand, the national faults of the French, pampered by a succession of French monarchs, were for a long time intensified by success, and not cured even by misfortune. The craving for glitter and fame; the tendency to grasp at these rather by loud adventurous achievements without than by silent effort within; the pretension to stand at the head of nations, and the thirst to patronize and plunder them; all these faults which lie in the Gallic nature, as those above named do in the German, were fostered to such an extent by Louis XIV., by the first and by,



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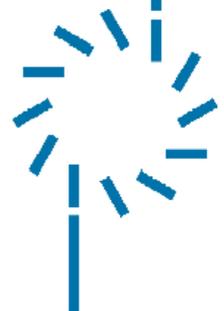
let us hope, the last Napoleon, that the national character has suffered the deepest injury. Glory in particular, which one of your Ministers has recently called the first word in the French language, is rather its worst and most pernicious; one which, the nation would do well to strike out of its dictionary for a long time to come. It is the golden calf round which the nation has for centuries kept up its dance; it is the Moloch at whose altar it has sacrificed and is even now again sacrificing its own sons and the sons of neighbouring nations; it is the *ignis fatuus* which has lured it from fields of prosperous labour into the wilderness, and often to the brink of the precipice. And while those earlier monarchs, Napoleon I. especially, were themselves possessed by this national demon, and therefore went even into their unjust wars with something of sincerity, with the present Napoleon it is the conscious cunning design to lead the nation astray into aims of cool self-seeking; to draw their attention away from their moral and political destitution within, that is, by ever and ever stirring up the national passion for glitter, fame, and depredation. Against Russia in the Crimea, against Austria in Italy, he was successful. In Mexico he met with sensible disaster. Against Prussia he let the right moment slip. At the beginning of this year the world could for a moment believe that he was in good faith, leaving this path and turning to that of internal reform, in the sense of rational freedom and administrative amendment; till his backward spring to the Plebiscite convinced all the world that he was still his old self. From that time Germany, too, had everything to fear—rather, should I say, everything to hope.

That unity which he desired to frustrate is ours. The unheard-of claim which lay in his demand on the King of Prussia was as comprehensible and intolerable to the poorest peasant in the March as to the kings and dukes south of the Main. The spirit of 1813-14 swept like a storm through every German land; and already the first events of the war have given us a pledge that a

nation which fights only for that for which it feels both the right and the power in itself cannot fail of its end. This end for which we struggle is simply the equal recognition of the European peoples,—the security that for the future a restless neighbour shall no more at his pleasure disturb us in the works of peace, and rob us of the fruits of our labour. For this we desire a guarantee, and only when this is given can we speak of a friendly understanding, of a harmonious combination of the two neighbouring peoples in all the labours of civilization and humanity; but not till that time when the French people shall find its false road closed to it will it be able to open its ear to voices like your own, which for long time past have called it to the true road—the road of honest domestic effort, of self-control and morality.

I have written in greater detail than pleases me individually, and indeed than is becoming; but our German affairs and aspirations easily rise before the foreigner as a mere mist; and to make them a little clear, some minuteness is unavoidable. You will, perhaps, think it even less becoming that these lines come to you in print, not in writing. In ordinary times I would certainly have first asked your consent to their publication; but as things are now, the right moment would have passed before my request could reach you, and your answer come to my hands; and I think that it is not ill done if in this crisis two men of the two nations, each in his own nation independent and far from political party strife, freely, though without passion, address one another on the causes and the meaning of the war; for my utterance will seem to me only then to have its true worth if it gives you occasion to express yourself in the like manner from your own point of view.

Rorschach, 12th August, 1870.



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