

BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW:
FRIEDRICH GENTZ, 1764-1832

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Abstract

This dissertation reviews the life and political impact of Friedrich Gentz, who was born in Breslau, Prussia, in 1764, and died in Vienna, Austria, in 1832. Though remembered today as only a second- (or even third-) tier statesman alongside such luminaries of his day as Napoleon, Metternich, Wellington, and others, Gentz was nonetheless of importance in the shifting tides of late 18th and early 19th-century politics in Europe. The German translator of Edmund Burke, he was instrumental in bringing the conservative thinker's ideas into the conversations of Central Europe, while his writings against first the French Revolution, then Napoleon, marked him as one of the leading opponents of revolutionary ideology, and led the French emperor to dub him "that miserable scribe."

But Gentz was important even beyond his anti-revolutionary polemics. As a product of the Enlightenment, he had some sympathy with the forces of modernity, and his career reflected the struggle to combine an openness to reform with hostility to revolution. In his later collaboration with Metternich to forge what became known as the Restoration, we can see just how much the post-Napoleonic conservative order in Europe was built upon a specific vision, one that rejected the quasi-feudal patterns of the *ancien regime* just as firmly as it did the democratic radicalism of its own day. Though it ultimately did not last, Gentz's work is clearly visible in the political contours of the 19th century.

From the Enlightenment salons of Berlin to the dazzling Congress of Vienna and beyond, *Between the Old and the New* traces the eventful career of one of the most interesting men of letters in Revolutionary-era Europe.

Introduction

I began research for my dissertation in 2014, exactly two centuries after Friedrich Gentz reached the pinnacle of his career as right-hand man to Klemens von Metternich at the Congress of Vienna. I have long been interested in intellectual history, in the history of ideas and of ideology-based political movements. As I had often seen Gentz referred to as one of the European Continent's chief disciples of conservative titan Edmund Burke, and even as his German counterpart, I initially believed that I would be able to use Gentz's life to tell the story of how German conservatism developed as a coherent force in the nineteenth century. His beliefs and his character would explain a great deal about this particular ideology.

After a year or two of research, I was gradually forced to revise the initial parameters of my project. Not that many of the achievements often credited to Gentz are not his. He was, as is frequently pointed out, the first man to translate *Reflections on the French Revolution* into German; he was in the forefront of intellectual opposition to the Revolution and to the conqueror it spawned, Napoleon Bonaparte; and as a close associate of Metternich at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, he was directly involved in creating a conservative political and social structure that would (in theory) restore order to the German states and prevent subsequent eruptions of revolutionary sentiment. All this is true; but as I have found, it is another thing entirely to call him "the German Burke."¹ Gentz did not single-handedly alter the terms of debate on the Revolution among Germans; his own attitude towards it was complex and at times inconsistent; and though all who knew him had a deep and well-merited respect for the power of his intellect, he left behind him no particular school of thought, no philosophy that played a pivotal role in shaping German conservatism. That political complex was the work of many men,

¹ George P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London: Longman and Green, 1920), 102.

some of whom—Justus Möser, Carl Ludwig von Haller, Friedrich Julius Stahl—arguably had more of a lasting impact than did Gentz.

These preliminary conclusions were arrived at with some reluctance, for they inevitably raise the question: why study Friedrich Gentz at all? Here too, the answer is not quite straightforward. Born in the Silesian city of Breslau in 1764 and dying in Vienna in 1832, Gentz was never among the first rank of European statesmen, not an equal to someone like Talleyrand or William Pitt; it was never in his power to legislate policy or represent an entire nation. Nonetheless, he was widely recognized during his life as a player of considerable importance on the political stage, in matters of both ideology and international diplomacy. His translation of Burke's *Reflections*, his long-running opposition, in official and unofficial capacities, to Napoleon and his wars of conquest, and his later position as secretary and advisor to Metternich in Austria, in which role he was heavily involved with the Congress of Vienna and the Restoration it established, alone merit him a significant place in the histories of that era. In the early nineteenth century, Gentz was a man known to all the leading ministers and men of letters in Europe, a man whose advice and support was earnestly sought.

Since his death, however, Gentz has fallen into considerable obscurity, with most historians of the period mentioning him only in passing or in conjunction with more famous figures such as Metternich. No extensive English-language treatment of him has been produced since the 1940s, and even the German literature is comparatively scanty. At times, the scholarly treatment of him has been little short of contemptuous, and this has provided another reason for my examination of his life and career. Jonathan Steinberg, for example, surveying the political scene of the time in a recent biography on Otto von Bismarck, briefly dismissed Gentz as “one of

the most brilliant con-men of the early nineteenth century.”² Frederick Beiser, including Gentz in his overview late eighteenth-century intellectual life in Germany, gives rather more consideration to his ideas, but in the end describes his career as “the greatest intelligence in the service of the greatest stupidity.”³ To be sure, as much of the secondary literature on Gentz admits, he was keen on self-promotion and could be slippery on some of his political positions. But to write him off in this way is unfair, both to the man himself and to the events and ideologies he had such a sizable part in shaping.

Whatever the nature of his impact, it is clear that Gentz did leave a significant mark on the European, and especially German, political landscape. A prolific writer, his works included not only a German translation of Burke’s *Reflections*, but also one of the first general histories of the French Revolution, a commentary on the American Revolution, polemical defenses of the Old Regime monarchies, and much else, in which he laid out his theories on the right of revolution, proper and improper forms of political order, and how to shore up Europe’s traditional institutions against the onslaught of revolutionary ideology. Moreover, his collaboration with Metternich and other statesmen at the Congress of Vienna laid the groundwork for the conservative and frequently repressive Restoration that dominated Europe in the two decades (more or less) after 1815. Gentz, however, was also one of the few to realize that if this attempt to turn back the clock were to succeed, it could not rely on authoritarian rule and censorship alone, and he suggested ways of giving the Restoration a positive, popular face that could win over the ruled to the rulers. For all this, he is rightly recognized as one of the most

² Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39.

³ Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 326.

relevant early figures in the formation of German conservatism as a political ideology, and simply in terms of his own actions, a study of Gentz casts considerable light on the period.

He is also important for what the course of his life represents—the demise, or at least deterioration, of the Enlightenment. Until the early 1790s, Gentz was no conservative or reactionary, but a fairly typical young man of the German *Aufklärung* and an assiduous follower of Kant and other intellectual luminaries of the period. It is important to note that, whatever his later reputation, he was initially very sympathetic to the French Revolution, and would not fully break with its principles for some years, although he was an employee of an increasingly hostile Prussian government. Standing out even then as an independent mind, his life at this time highlights the fluidity and diversity of thought that characterized the Enlightenment. With the advent of the radical phase of the French Revolution and its explosive consequences, however, such diversity became less and less sustainable. For Gentz, no less than for his future ideological opponents, sides had to be taken, for or against its actions and philosophy. By around 1800, he had become an often-vitriolic critic of the Revolution and everything it had led to, suffering a sort of estrangement from many former friends as a result. His career displays vividly the all-but unavoidable polarization that occurred within the European intellectual community.

It also highlights the mental gymnastics members of that community had to go through in reconciling their earlier support for the Enlightenment with the consequences of the forces unleashed on the continent after 1789. Until that year, the European “Republic of Letters” displayed, if not unity, a remarkable degree of consensus on the nature of society, its problems, how to correct them, and what to expect in the future. Human potential and happiness had been restrained up to this era by the ignorance and superstition of the past, but now reason and science were being more thoroughly employed to sweep away these mental cobwebs and point the way

to a future that would be brighter with each passing year. There was no reason, moreover, why this could not be done through the established order, winning over to the side of progress rulers and bureaucrats who would then implement the necessary changes. Order and enlightenment could and would coexist, leading to the liberation of mankind on every front. This is not to say that differences did not exist among the intellectual community. They did indeed. Some felt that a centralized monarchy was the best way to bring about the desired changes; others preferred a “mixed” government. Some believed the public (itself not always defined the same way) could be trusted with a role in the political process, while others insisted it was not yet ready. Some adhered to free trade and others to mercantilism or protectionism; some favored broad social reform and others did not; and so on. But these disagreements, for the most part, took place within a general agreement on the desired ends of society and government, and that the correct doctrines would be empirically discovered in time and with a minimum of fuss.

This complacency, common among intellectuals and statesmen alike, did not survive the furious years of the French Revolution. Few who considered themselves a part of the Enlightenment lent their support to the actual policies implemented by the revolutionaries, especially as they became more radical (i.e., its increasingly democratic behavior and its use of a police state and revolutionary tribunals), nor were they altogether pleased, in the event, by the authoritarian resolution to the revolutionary era, in the form of Napoleon. At the same time, many of them could not help but be attracted to the spectacle, as they saw it, of an entire nation crying out for freedom, overthrowing its “tyrannical” rulers, and invoking Enlightenment ideas in shaping the new government. The trouble, as many recognized, was to determine where things had gone wrong, what—if anything—from the Revolution and its principles of “liberty, equality, fraternity” could be salvaged, and what aspects of the Old Regime were to be preserved: and, of

course, how to do all this. Although Gentz was one of the more notable Enlightenment-era thinkers who tackled this problem, he was hardly the only one; *Aufklärer* like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Herder had to face this problem, as did non-German thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, and others.

Gentz never completely broke with the ideas of his youth. He rejected the Revolution, but he never really abandoned the Enlightenment tradition in which he had been raised. Even as far as the Revolution was concerned, his opinions on it changed over time, rather than all at once—his evaluation of the event in 1800 was not what it had been in 1793, much less 1790. The critical departure came in the early 1790s, as the Revolution radicalized and culminated in the Reign of Terror; the history of his career from that point until its very end is a long process of trying to reconcile those early values of the *Aufklärung* with the goal of preventing a repetition of the Revolution and its horrors, and the interplay of these two impulses pushed him deeper and deeper into the conservative camp over time. Even so, Gentz did not comfortably fit into that camp for much of his career. During the Napoleonic Wars, he was generally preoccupied by the intricacies of foreign affairs and gave second place to more ideological issues; but even when these issues were uppermost in his mind, he often (after 1792, that is) found himself agreeing with many of the assumptions of the revolutionaries and their Enlightenment forebears, even if not their conclusions. The English-language biographies on which I have drawn—Paul Sweet’s *Defender of the Old Order* and Paul Reiff’s *Opponent of the French Revolution and Napoleon*—have some truth in their titles, but only some. Gentz’s support for the *ancien regime*, though genuine, was never absolute, and even his opposition to Napoleon was qualified. There were certainly times in which he adopted an arch-conservative, even reactionary, position, but it often

did seem as though he was trying to straddle (not very comfortably) the widening gulf between Left and Right.

The ways in which he attempted this lead to a consideration of Gentz's relationship to the legacy of German conservatism. If Burke first gave the ideology a coherent platform, Gentz had a great deal of responsibility for its importation into the German states and for filtering it through both his own political thought and the structures of those states. Conservatism in Germany bears to a great extent the stamp of his ideas. At the same time, the sort of conservatism he represented was only one strand in a broader intellectual tradition, in which Moser and others also loom large. In an era in which the term itself had not yet been coined, to be a conservative, especially in Germany, could mean many different things. The ideology Gentz brought forth did not encompass the entire Right; rather, it was a particular byproduct of his own inner tension as an *Aufklärer* on the one hand, and a counter-revolutionary on the other. The following dissertation will focus heavily on this aspect of his life and career, comparing and contrasting his thought with that of such contemporaries as Möser, Adam Müller, and others.

An extensive study of Gentz's life is not easy. He was an important political theorist, whose ideas and contributions deserve to be analyzed at length; at the same time, he was a man both in and of the world, who spent much of his time focusing on personal drama or high-stakes diplomatic games instead of philosophical abstractions. This dissertation will attempt to do justice to both sides of this complex man, presenting him as both a person and a contributor to the history of ideas. It will be in large part biographical, describing at length Gentz's life, both public and private; what factors influenced his intellectual development, the nature of his reaction to the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, his later maneuverings in the diplomatic world, and so on. However, being *biographical* does not make this work a *biography*.

Several older biographies of Gentz have already been written, and will be cited on occasion here; but, while of high quality, they are often sparse with detail concerning his ideas, where they came from, their influence, etc.—a gap which badly needs correcting, considering his role in the creation of European conservatism. Far too many of their pages are filled with stories of his affairs, how he got along (or not) with his superiors, his moody personality, and so on. Not that this information is irrelevant. It is certainly true that Gentz had a number of vices; he was overly fond of pleasures, he was improvident with money and constantly in debt, he humiliated his wife with a string of very public infidelities (one of the reasons he had to all but flee Berlin). It is also true that he was vain and a social climber.

One's personal life is rarely if ever separable from one's ideas, and Gentz's personal life will be discussed here at appropriate times. So far as is possible, I will avoid passing any personal judgment on him, good or bad—in trying to resurrect someone as a political figure, one naturally runs the risk of inadvertently trying to redeem them as a person as well, and this tendency cannot be entirely avoided. But the details of Gentz's personal life are not what make him interesting, except maybe as a window into the social realities of the *Sattelzeit*. The ideas he stood for and helped to disseminate, his part in trying to construct a conservative, anti-revolutionary Europe—these are what make him of interest to the historian, and it is on these that I will focus. To the extent that his personal life is discussed, it will be chiefly with regard to this question of whether his ideas were merely a product of his vices.

This dissertation therefore will also, of necessity, place him in the context of the intellectual world of Europe and especially Germany in the late eighteenth century—his interactions, for example, with more prominent thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Adam Müller, and others, while giving attention as well to how such intellectuals and

“men of letters” related to the courtly aristocratic culture that dominated Old Regime Europe: an issue key to understanding Gentz, for both the man himself and his ideas were products of that culture. Additionally, it will take note of how the positions Gentz developed regarding revolution and political order were reflected in the German post-Napoleonic political structure, especially through such momentous legislation as the Karlsbad Decrees.

These topics will be reflected in the dissertation’s organization, which will be more or less chronological. Chapter One will review Gentz’s early life, from his birth in Breslau in 1764 through his background, upbringing, education, and relocation to Berlin as a young man, up to about the time of the French Revolution. There will also be some framing of the intellectual climate in German-speaking Europe at this time, including the *Aufklärung* as well as the reactions against it. The following two chapters will address the Revolution itself and the changes in Gentz’s attitude toward it, from wholehearted approval in 1789-90 to trenchant opposition in 1793-94, as well as his early attempts to lay out a systematic plan of attack upon its principles. Indeed, the period up to about 1800 can be considered his most ideological phase, the years in which he made the most strenuous efforts to craft a competing theory of rights, state, and society. At the same time, it will place his shifting opinions in the context of Europe-wide reactions to the Revolution, showing along the way that the nature and timing of Gentz’s change of heart was very similar to that of other spectators.

In Chapter Four, I will trace Gentz’s slow rise to international fame in the 1790s and early 1800s as a polemicist, man of letters, and defender of the status quo, culminating in his 1802 removal from Prussia to Austria. The articles and treatises he produced during this period, covering a range of issues but mostly connected in some way to the French Revolution and its effects, were important not only for his own career but as an effort to develop his own political

theories, and these theories and their implications for Gentz's view of the world will be examined at length. The chapter following this will focus on the upheavals immediately afterward—the time of the Napoleonic Wars. For the decade and a half that Napoleon dominated France and then Europe, Gentz was one of his most consistent and vociferous opponents, combating him in his published material and within the Austrian government for which he worked from 1803 onward. Although some of his works from this period are of a historical or philosophical nature as before, matters of international diplomacy and Allied strategy become especially important during this period, presaging his later role in those arenas. It was during this time, as well, that Gentz began his (complicated) partnership with his more famous patron and friend, Metternich.

The latter portions of the dissertation will examine Gentz's position in the post-Napoleonic order, as European rulers struggled to come to terms with and contain the effects of the past quarter-century. His role in the Congress of Vienna, not only as the man responsible for putting its decisions to paper but as Metternich's adviser, confidant, and even critic, will be the subject of Chapter Seven. Chapter Eight, meanwhile, will focus on the fallout from the Congress within the new German Confederation, as Gentz, having briefly flirted with the budding nationalist movement, turned savagely against it once it came to represent a threat to the Restoration he was committed to maintaining. The final chapter, by contrast, will place Gentz in a broader European context during the last decade or so of his life, as he reacted to events happening well outside Germany, and take note of his growing critique of Metternich and other conservatives. Whereas many of them responded to revolutionary stirrings with nothing more than censorship, police crackdowns, and even armed intervention, Gentz (though he often supported these measures as well) repeatedly stressed the need for a more positive means of

solidifying the Restoration through a constructive use of public opinion. The conclusion will consider the impact Gentz had on German conservatism—sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not—and his position astride both the Enlightenment and counter-revolutionary camps.

By his last years, Friedrich Gentz had accepted the hard truth all conservatives and reactionaries of the era eventually had to face: the clock could not be turned back. Nonetheless, his efforts had not all been wasted. Throughout his career, he had consistently stood for such principles as an international balance of powers, practicality in political action, and above all else, a demand that the concrete be favored above the abstract. Though Gentz's philosophy changed much over time, he always rejected the notion that constitutions and rights could be created out of whole cloth; they always had to have a legal and historical precedent. In this sense, if not in others, his impact on European history and political systems was a constructive one.

Chapter 1

The city of Wroclaw, Poland, located on the Oder River in the southwest part of the country, belongs to that region of east-central Europe over which countless wars have ensued. The city's very name reflects this: before 1945 it was a German city, spelled Breslau, belonging, as had the rest of its province of Silesia since the eighteenth century, to the state of Prussia; earlier yet, though, the name Wroclaw, with other Slavic variations, had been predominant, and it was recognized as a Polish or Czech region. Rich in natural resources, and providing a natural avenue into either Prussia to the north or the Habsburg territories to the south, the Silesian basin was the subject of more than one conflict during the early modern era—indeed, the desire to possess it was one of the main reasons for the highly destructive Seven Years' War. Belonging to the Habsburgs since the sixteenth century, the whole province had been forcibly annexed by Prussia's Frederick the Great in the 1740s, setting off a struggle between the two powers that would not be fully settled until 1763, at which point Austria surrendered its claims over Breslau and the rest of the territory.

Long before this date, Frederick had begun to treat Silesia as an integral part of his domain, legislating over it as he would for any province, and sending his civil servants there to set up a regular administration in his name. One of these bureaucrats was a certain Johann Friedrich Gentze, appointed to operation of the mint in Breslau in 1762. Not a great deal is known about Gentze. Born about the year 1726, in the town of Baerwalde in the Neumark, son of a minor official, he was educated at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder and entered the civil service in 1750, being employed at various positions before receiving his transfer to Breslau for health reasons. The year after taking up his duties there, he married a young woman from Berlin, Elisabeth Ancillon (died 1804), the daughter of a prominent family within that city's significant

French Huguenot community. The year after that—on May 2, 1764, to be exact—the first of their five children was born, a boy who was named Friedrich, and the circumstances of whose life would lead some to call him “Prussia’s indemnification to Austria for the theft of Silesia.”⁴

Except for the accident of birth, of course, neither Friedrich nor the rest of his family were Silesian at all. Details of the youth’s earliest years are very sparse, but from allusions to it in his later correspondence, his childhood in Breslau does not appear to have been an unhappy one, and he evidently felt enough of an attachment to the city to seek appointment to the governing council there in the early 1790s (though this may have been careerism more than anything).⁵ But the Gentzes were Prussians, and Berliners, first. Johann Gentze was an outsider, a civil servant dedicated to the absolutist Hohenzollern state, and both familial and professional ties bound him to the capital rather than provincial Breslau. The closest family friends were not Silesian locals, but educated middle-class Prussians like himself: particularly the playwright Gotthold Lessing and the philosopher Christian Garve. Hence, it does not seem to have been with any great sense of loss that when his father was named general director of the Berlin mint in 1779, the now fifteen-year-old Friedrich, his parents, and his four younger siblings—Heinrich, Ludwig, Florentine, and Lisette—departed for the capital.

Berlin at this time, in the last years of Frederick the Great’s rule, was still in the process of becoming one of the premier cities of Continental Europe. Unable to rival, say, Vienna as a

⁴ Paul R. Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz: Defender of the Old Order*, 3-4. Friedrich retained the original family spelling of “Gentze” until about 1788, when he dropped the final “e.” His reasons for doing so were never made clear, at least not through his correspondence. Friedrich Carl Wittichen, who edited and published Gentz’s correspondence in 1909, suggests that “Gentze” was the spelling used by the Prussian Huguenot community with which the family associated during Friedrich’s youth. In his 1784 letter of introduction to the philosopher Christian Garve, he crossed out the final “-e,” which suggests that he already intended to shorten his name and make it less Francophonic.

⁵ *Briefe von und an Friedrich von Gentz, Auf Veranlassung und mit Unterstützung der Wedekind-Stiftung zu Göttingen*, ed. Friedrich Carl Wittichen (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1909), (hereafter *Briefe von und an Gentz*) Vol. I, 194-96.

center for the arts or in architectural wonders, the Prussian capital was important chiefly as a commercial and administrative center. Surrounded by forests, humid in summer, freezing in winter, and suffering periodic sandstorms on account of the thin Brandenburg soil, it was not a picturesque locality by any means, and to many outsiders, had little to recommend it at all. By the 1770s and 1780s, however, there were certain signs of intellectual and cultural growth, thanks in large part to the burgeoning middle classes. Although heavily dependent on the bureaucracy and the court for what wealth it possessed, the bourgeoisie had wealth enough to construct impressive residences along the Wilhelmstrasse and Potsdamer Platz and to carve out respectable neighborhoods for themselves. Gradually, too, they began to constitute the bulk of the civil service, and thus to become a vital element of the Prussian state.⁶ Much of this activity came from the French Huguenot colony in the city (approximately five thousand out of a total population of 140,000), including the Ancillon family to which Friedrich's mother belonged. The Ancillons were already emerging as acknowledged leaders of the community and mainstays of the established order; one of Friedrich's cousins, Johann Peter Friedrich Ancillon, was an important lifelong civil servant for the Prussian government, eventually becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, and during the Restoration an outspoken reactionary to boot.⁷ The Ancillon connection, therefore, was critical for launching the Gentze family into the upper ranks of the Berlin bourgeoisie, in which it became closely intertwined with other Huguenot families such as the architecturally-renowned Gillys, into which Friedrich later married. Moreover, while future centers of intellectual activity, such as the famous university, did not yet exist, the fact that it was

⁶ There are a variety of sources on life in late eighteenth-century Prussia and Berlin in particular. Two that were especially helpful here are Walter H. Bruford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century: The Social Background of the Literary Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), and Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁷ Paul Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz: An Opponent of the French Revolution and Napoleon* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1912).

a center of government, especially for a self-professed “*Aufklärer*” like Frederick II, meant there were plenty of Enlightenment salons and first-rate schools to be found.

If the middle classes did not as yet hold much power in the Prussian state, then, they did constitute a significant community within German society—and exerted a definite intellectual and cultural weight upon it as well. The word “bourgeoisie” is perhaps inadequate to properly label this social rank, given the extreme variations to be found within it; *bürgerlich* might be more accurate. The historian Peter Reill describes it as not an economic class, in the modern way of thinking, but “a collection of professional, legal, and economic groups held together by a number of common attitudes.”⁸ Despite vast internal differences (a merchant in Hamburg, for example, was not the same as a lawyer in Stuttgart), members of the bourgeoisie or the *bürgerlich* estate were united in their opposition to what they viewed as the extravagance and anachronism of the nobility. In contrast, they lived in a manner that emphasized moderation and piety, and strove for self-improvement through education. This is to drastically oversimplify the situation, of course, but it does capture how members of this group were perceived in the eighteenth century, by themselves and others.

These inclinations also tended to make *bürgerlich* Germans receptive to the European Enlightenment, though not in the same way as in some other parts of the Continent. Though few elements within this group were indifferent or hostile to the movement, those most involved in it were usually lawyers, academics, civil servants, and Protestant clergymen—all individuals who had advanced within the system, and who therefore, while wanting to trim or correct abuses within the Old Regime, were unwilling to upset it entirely, as many of their counterparts in France advocated. They generally lacked the fervent anticlericalism of the *philosophes*, for

⁸ Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 4.

example.⁹ Peter Reill suggests that England, more than France or any other country, was the role model for members of the *Aufklärung*: “To many Germans, England appeared to have solved the tension between change and continuity. The English had constructed a modern state without having destroyed the traditional feudal base.”¹⁰

Their illustrious son left no composite description of his parents, but from certain references and remarks in his correspondence and diary, Johann and Elisabeth appear to have been entirely a part of this bourgeois or *bürgerlich* tradition. Hard-working, sober, well-educated, conventionally pious, they had high expectations of their children and did not look kindly on failure or improvidence; but for all that, they were loving parents who did what they could for their children’s welfare, perpetuating close familial ties. Friedrich later recalled how, at the time of his divorce and his departure from the Prussian bureaucracy, he had gone to see his father, who expressed his great displeasure at his son’s actions, but in the end was “reconciled” to him and gave him money to assist in his travels to Vienna.¹¹ The later deaths of his parents were a source of great sorrow to him, and to the end of his life, he kept in touch with his siblings who had stayed behind in Berlin.

This environment left its mark on Friedrich. In spirit, he certainly seemed to be at home amidst the nobility for most of his adult life; sobriety and self-control were not words one would readily use to describe his habits. Yet his political thought often displayed the same tension that characterized most of his class: interested in reform, impatient with the errors and incompetence of his social superiors, but tied, professionally as well as emotionally, to the status quo, and on

⁹ Richard Gawthrop, *Pietism and the Making of Eighteenth-Century Prussia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia*, trans. Frank Jellinck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Reill, *The German Enlightenment*, 4.

¹¹ *Tagebücher von Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Karl August Varnhagen von Ense (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1873), Vol. I, 20-21.

balance its defender. He also displayed, for a long time, the Anglophilia that was common to *Aufklärer*, and it was no accident that he would later be described as “the German Burke.”¹²

Shortly after arriving in the capital, the Gentze sons began attending one of its most prestigious schools, the Joachimsthal Gymnasium in the Charlottenburg district.¹³ It was here that Friedrich would have completed his training in such subjects as French, Latin, and rhetoric, all of which (and others) he later put to such effective use with his pen. Here, too, he would have read for the first time the works of some of Germany’s leading men in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century metaphysics and legal theory, including Samuel von Pufendorf, Christian Wolff, Gottfried Achenwall, and August Ludwig von Schlözer. The faculty there included the popular philosopher Johann Jakob Engel, and Friedrich would have known him as well as Moses Mendelssohn, who was a friend of the family. Surrounded by such luminaries as these, it is not surprising that after four years, he graduated in the first rank, *primus omnium*, and, intending to follow in his father’s footsteps as a career bureaucrat, promptly set out for Prussia’s premier institution of higher learning, the University of Königsberg, in early 1783.

The University of Königsberg, at that time certainly the most prestigious institution of learning in the Hohenzollern state and among the most famous in Germany, was not overly impressive at first glance. Consisting of a handful of humble, rundown buildings, the university was huddled within the old city of Königsberg, capital of the province of East Prussia, so far at the margins of the German-speaking world that it had spent a good portion of the Seven Years’ War under Russian occupation. Famous and powerfully influential it was, all the same, when Friedrich Gentz journeyed there, chiefly because it was home to the great philosopher Immanuel

¹² George P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London: Longmans and Green, 1920), 102.

¹³ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht: Friedrich Gentz als politischer Schriftsteller* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 22.

Kant (1722-1804). Kant had just published his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), one of several treatises that had propelled him into the first rank of Enlightenment thinkers in Germany, and indeed Europe. His intellectual powers, at their zenith at this time, and his known reputation for taking in young students and encouraging discussion among them, drew many to Königsberg, and in fact it was primarily Kant's presence there that had convinced Johann Gentze his son must study there, rather than at Frankfurt an der Oder, his alma mater. He had in fact met Kant during a business trip to the city in 1780, and had arranged for the philosopher and family friend Mendelssohn to write to him on Friedrich's behalf.¹⁴ That this could be managed is further evidence of the close-knit nature of the Berliner *Mittelstand*, and of the somewhat privileged status the young Gentz held even within that group. (The link between Mendelssohn and the Gentze family is itself significant, and the first instance of a recurrent association between Gentz and prominent European Jews.) As for Gentz himself, he had already begun to display a certain penchant for the mysteries of philosophy, and especially for Kant's contributions to the field. He had started reading the old man's latest works, and confessed that while exploring his "difficult and subtle speculations" was an arduous task, "I do not regret the dreadful journey."¹⁵

Gentz spent the next two years at Königsberg under the tutelage of Kant and other professors, living the life of a rather privileged young university student. Despite its remote location and small size, the city and its environs had quite a lot to offer culturally. In the summer there were large pleasure gardens open to the public; during the winter, an elevated theater scene, along with frequent concerts and balls. There must have been much intellectual conversation among the students at these events, along with gossip and other mundane affairs, and it would have been easy for a young man in his late teens or early twenties to have his head turned by this

¹⁴ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 141.

“high life.” Gentz, it would seem, found it difficult to play the part of a sober Protestant aspiring civil servant after that.¹⁶

Of more importance here, of course, is the impact of Kant and other men of the *Aufklärung* on him at this time. That the two would have been closely associated is certain. An eighteenth-century university, even a major one, was a far different animal than its modern equivalent; total enrollment often numbered only in the hundreds, and it was expected that professors would have a close, master-apprentice relationship with their students. Kant, in particular, cultivated such a relationship, spending entire afternoons in friendly conversation with a few of his pupils. Friedrich probably was not in the philosopher’s most intimate circle, for few of Kant’s writings refer to him, and the young Berliner’s name was not closely linked with his at any time. Even so, the old man would have included him in this intellectual and personal community, having been approached by the elder Gentze on his son’s behalf. Friedrich would have enjoyed long lunches with the old man and discussed with him such diverse matters as politics and geography, and had the chance to read first drafts of his philosophical writings.¹⁷

It was in this setting that he absorbed the so-called “Kantian” system of philosophy, which cannot possibly receive full justice here. Suffice to say that his time in Königsberg came in the critical gap between the end of the American and the start of the French Revolution, when the various structures that comprised the Old Regime were starting to decay and showing signs of instability. There was a great deal of confidence in the future and its possibilities, both political and social, but also growing anxiety over the fate of the existing order, from a growing population, the potential ill effects of spreading Enlightenment ideas, and the fact of successful revolution in America. Kant was already wading into these issues and their practical applications

¹⁶ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 6-7.

¹⁷ Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 328.

with his *Reflexionnen* and his *Naturrecht Feyerabend* (the latter a lecture course composed in 1784 while Gentz was at Königsberg). It was in these that he developed his juxtaposition of the rights of man with one's duty to obey one's rulers, and his ethical principle known as the categorical imperative: to wit, there is an absolute, abstract morality applicable to all humans in all situations (not necessarily reflected in existing laws and customs), which everyone has the rational capacity to discover and the unalterable duty to follow. It was from this that Kant was later accused of being too theoretical, with no thought for practical consequences or the give-and-take of human affairs. Because of being among the first to tackle these issues associated with modern politics—order versus liberty, change and alienation, theory versus practice—Kant achieved in his lifetime the place he holds today in the Western intellectual tradition.

There are no surviving records of how well the two got along, nor any correspondence between them after Gentz left Königsberg, but Kant must have been somewhat impressed by his student's intellect, for in 1790 he had Gentz do the second proofreading for his *Critique of Judgment*, applying Kant's philosophical system to aesthetics and teleology.¹⁸ Additionally, in at least one case he recommended to later students of his visiting Berlin that they get in touch with Gentz. The evidence at hand would not immediately suggest that Gentz was truly an intimate of the philosopher's, given the lack of correspondence or repeated mention of one another, but he was at least remembered and thought well of by the old master. Certainly he did not delve very deeply into metaphysics and epistemology like his teacher, and the lifestyle Gentz took up was not that of a philosopher. Yet as Golo Mann points out, the young student was permanently marked by Kantian philosophy: "Kant's rigid ethics, his categorical imperative, and his idea of a league of nations can still be traced in the manifestoes with which Gentz summoned the world

¹⁸ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 155, 182. Though the importance of this should not be exaggerated, since Kant was known for being rather uninterested and indeed careless in matters of editing and proofreading.

twenty years later to concerted effort against Napoleon. His thoughts revolved incessantly about the relation between morals and government, ideas and experience, right and might, and the impulse thereto came from Kant.”¹⁹

How much Gentz was influenced by Kant can be clearly seen in an October 1789 letter to Christian Garve, in which he discusses a recent publication by a fellow Breslau native on the nature of rights and duties. Gentz posed the question of whether compulsory duties or mere duties of conscience existed in the state of nature, and gave the following answer: “The distinction between compulsory duties and duties of conscience...I think to be this: everyone who acts out of duty, regardless of which kind it may be, is compelled to act. As soon as I lose this notion of moral compulsion, I also lose the idea of duty.... This is the case for all duties, and all moralists who want to adopt the highest moral principle must also accept these characteristics, if they do not wish to toy with the word ‘duty.’” One could in some cases be compelled to perform a duty by an external power, but that did not affect one’s inner moral obligation to do so.²⁰ Though he admitted to having considerable doubts about whether the categorical imperative could really function in practice, still this is markedly similar to what Kant had written, and though only twenty-five at the time, Gentz never really abandoned this position. His treatises of the 1790s, as well as his prescriptions for the German Confederation in the 1810s and ‘20s, are all colored with the relationship he perceived between rights, morals, and duties.

That said, Kant was hardly the only figure shaping his thought at Königsberg. There were others, most notably the family friend from Breslau days, Christian Garve (1742-1798). The influence of Garve on Gentz’s early life is significant enough that it is worth briefly delving into

¹⁹ Golo Mann, *Secretary of Europe: The Life of Friedrich Gentz, Enemy of Napoleon*, trans. William H. Woglom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 10.

²⁰ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 149.

this individual's own career and outlook. A native of Leipzig, Garve was regarded during his lifetime as the leading light for the conservative wing of the Berlin *Aufklärung* and, in certain ways, seems to be more of a German counterpart to Edmund Burke than Gentz himself does. Prior to the French Revolution, he had already gone on the record, with such treatises as *Abhandlung über die Verbindung der Moral mit der Politik* (1788), as an advocate for the salutary role of custom and tradition in guiding human action, especially where politics was concerned. Intensely interested in the gap between theoretical ethics and their practical application, he acted as a foil to Kant and his categorical imperative, and the first section of Kant's "Ueber den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis" was explicitly intended to answer Garve's criticisms. As the breakdown of the Old Regime in France gathered speed, Garve was among the few observers to display, early on, a caution that rapidly grew into deep skepticism, without even suggesting, as some did, that the Revolution was good for France but would be bad for Germany. Though he did show some mild optimism in the summer of 1789, subsequent events, such as the march of the Parisian mob on Versailles that fall, and later the infringement on the Catholic Church with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, soured his feelings. Already in November 1789 he was commenting to a friend, "my hopes have sunk much... So far, I see... nothing constructive, only destruction." And in early 1791, reflecting on seizures of property, he acidly wrote, "The French have learned contempt for their king, but money they have gladly kept. They have accepted republican equality, but republican poverty, even with the heads of their state, appears not to have its old dignity."²¹

As his later treatises made clear, Garve's opposition to the Revolution was multifaceted. Seizure of property, he argued, whether the property concerned was that of the nobility, the

²¹ Christian Garve, *Sämtliche Werke* (Breslau: 1801-1803), XVII, 6-7.

Church, the peasantry, or anyone, was an unacceptable violation of the social contract, no matter what the reason—indeed, securing of property was the main reason the social contract existed in the first place. By taking this step, the revolutionaries in France could no longer accurately claim to stand for “liberty.” Just as troubling was the spirit in which the confiscation had been carried out: not only had the National Assembly resorted to force, which compounded the original error, it had knowingly outraged many of its citizens, who saw it as an attack upon the Church and upon God. This observation led Garve into a more general reflection on the proper speed of reform. Reform in itself could be, and often was, a good thing, but not if it was imposed in the face of a large portion of the people. Truly beneficial reform, rather, went hand in hand with proper instruction and enlightenment of the populace; it united rather than divided. Because the National Assembly had failed to do this, in most if not all of the reforms it was carrying out, Garve considered the French Revolution to be a failure. He increasingly speculated that the French were not really ready for a democracy, for they seemed only to split into factions and war with one another.²²

As previously mentioned, Garve and Friedrich Gentz had been acquainted since the latter’s youth in Breslau, when Garve had been on a friendly footing with his parents; in a later letter, Gentz recalled how, as a boy of seven, he had been instructed by the philosopher on the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer.²³ The two only began to interact as peers, though, when Gentz was a student at Königsberg, gaining a background in the theories of law preparatory to his career as a civil servant. Garve was especially important for introducing Gentz to the ideas and assumptions of natural law, which the faculties at Königsberg and many other German

²² See also the summary and analysis of Garve in Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 311-17.

²³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 139.

universities strongly favored in the late eighteenth century. “Natural law” is somewhat hard to define as a concept; it can be interpreted in a variety of ways, not least because so many people fall into the trap of associating it with nature per se. Put in the most straightforward way possible, natural law is the philosophy that law exists outside of any or all sets of statutes or rulings—without ever being written down on paper, it is imprinted on human hearts. Human nature being universal, all men have the capacity to use their reason to discover this universal law or laws, and to enshrine it in the written bodies of law which they then create (known as positive law). Those familiar with the ancient philosophers will recognize the strong Platonist element in such a concept, though Aristotle and, above all, the Roman orator Cicero had more to do with its articulation. Through the utterances of the latter, especially, we see how natural law was to be applied to concrete human societies: “We ought to regard, to cultivate, and to promote the good will and the social welfare of all mankind,” “Nothing is more disgraceful than insincerity,” “The desertion of the common interest is contrary to nature,” “Equality of rights has ever been the object of desire; nor otherwise can there be any rights at all.”²⁴

Preaching as it did the importance of justice, moderation, equal rights, and sanctity of property, it is not hard to see the appeal of natural law to the middle-class or *bürgerlich* Germans who fueled the Enlightenment in their country. Legal philosophers such as Samuel von Pufendorf and Christian Wolff strongly adhered to the doctrine, as did a variety of lesser-known lights in the early and mid-eighteenth century, even if there was much disagreement on its specific political implications. From the 1780s onward, natural law would come under attack in the German intellectual sphere, especially from the early Romantics who criticized it as too rationalistic, but it still held sway at Königsberg and other universities when Gentz (who had in

²⁴ Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 31-35, 50-52.

any case already imbibed Pufendorf and Wolff during his gymnasium days) was a student. Garve, for example, had recently translated and edited Cicero's treatise on natural law, *De Officiis*, stressing, as one of his cast of mind might be expected to do, the principles of moderation and balance in all things.²⁵

For his part, Friedrich Gentz frequently debated points of natural law and the Ciceronian interpretation of it with his professor, challenging or critiquing certain points of his commentary. One of the very earliest surviving letters we have from him, in fact, a missive to Garve from Königsberg in October 1784, discusses this translated treatise. No doubt partly on account of his status as a mere student, Gentz here is full of praise for what Garve has written, saying "Almost every page of your marvelous book has set me ablaze...My mind has realized its accuracy, and I thank Providence that my heart has felt its truth." This expressive, enthusiastic personal style was a trait that Gentz would never lose—it infuses so many of his later correspondence and treatises—but at the time, it was not such an unusual thing to write for a twenty-year-old swimming in the high-minded ideals of the ancients.²⁶ For his part, Garve was quite found of his erstwhile pupil, praising his accomplishments in letters to his friends and writing the year before his death, after a visit by Gentz to Breslau, that he had learned more about the history of the French Revolution from the young man (who was then trying to assemble a history of the event) than from any other source.²⁷

Gentz did not finish out his studies in Königsberg. He had already been given a position in the bureaucracy sometime toward the end of 1784; accordingly, he departed for Berlin the following April without obtaining a degree from the university—a fairly common practice at the

²⁵ Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 35.

²⁶ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 140-41.

²⁷ *Briefe von Christian Garve an Christian F. Weiße und einige andere Freunde*, (Breslau, 1803). For more on the intellectual kinship between Gentz and Garve, see *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 127-37.

time, especially for those entering the civil service. Upon returning to the Prussian capital, his ascent into the lower ranks of the bureaucrats was rapid—by August, he had been appointed *Herr Geheimer Sekretär* in the *Seehandlung*, a bank within the jurisdiction of the Prussian government’s General Directory, with an annual income of around two hundred thaler.²⁸ This appointment most likely came about through his father’s string-pulling, but it is entirely possible that Gentz had already shown a talent for financial matters—during the Napoleonic Wars, some of his most critically-acclaimed writing would be not on ideology but on monetary policy. Later, probably in 1788, he would be transferred to the division overseeing the Kurmark (no government structure was clearly departmentalized in those days).²⁹

Still just twenty-one, the young man already seemed to be advancing up the ladder of bourgeois respectability; not only did he have a profession laid out for him, but he had also recently augmented his social position by becoming engaged. Coelestine Schwinck, the daughter of a businessman in Königsberg, had become acquainted with Gentz through a mutual friend, Elisabeth Graun, the wife of a local councilor, and the three of them began a rather rushed but intense relationship that culminated in Friedrich’s proposal of marriage to Coelestine. All indications are that he seriously intended to marry the young woman, writing: “I have never been traitor to virtue: I love [her] as on the day of my departure.”³⁰ It is clear, though, that Gentz really desired Elisabeth, a woman slightly older than himself with a great capacity for wit and depth of feeling, and might very well have proposed marriage to her instead, except that she was already

²⁸ Most university students would have obtained a degree after three or four years’ study. However, finishing early without a degree was not uncommon at the time, nor, as the record shows, did it prevent one from finding lucrative or prestigious employment. F. Goldbeck, ed., *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Universität zu Königsberg in Preußen und den dasselbst befindlichen Lehr-, Schul-, und Erziehungsanstalten* (place of publication unknown, 1782), 101.

²⁹ Gentz was initially assigned to the Directory’s South Prussian department, but the variety of his duties meant that he was also simultaneously on the staff of the Kurmark and Westphalian departments.

³⁰ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 49.

married—unhappily so, it appears, but married nonetheless. Gentz’s letters to Coelestine have not survived—he may have burned them—but those to Frau Graun have, and they read like something out of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Berlin, December 31, 1785

Dear Friend!

I know that you yourself felt, even when you wrote your last letter to me, how much you have thereby delighted, refreshed, blessed me, I know it; for a soul that truly is a soul is the first to feel every sweet sensation that it arouses in others. But it would be as superfluous as it is impossible for me to describe to you here how I felt, when I read from every line, and in every word, the assurance I wished for, that you would be and even now are my friend....

And on and on—and this in the middle of his engagement to Coelestine.³¹ The exact nature of Gentz’s relationship with his fiancée cannot be known; nor do we have any idea whether Coelestine knew of the intensity of Friedrich’s correspondence with another woman, or what she thought of it if she did. A letter to a member of the Schwinck family, though, suggests that if she did not object to this relationship, her family did—or else they had doubts about her suitor’s career prospects. Be that as it may, Gentz returned to Königsberg the following autumn, for the public announcement of his engagement—only for Coelestine to break the whole thing off. It was an embarrassment in more ways than one, for, having expected to conclude the marriage, he had convinced his father to give him an advance of eight hundred thaler, a serious sum of money compared to his regular earnings.

Whether this ill-fortune had any lasting impact on Gentz is unknown. The letter to Coelestine’s relative, written in the spring of 1787, he acknowledged feeling bitter disappointment over the affair but insisted all that was now behind him: “...all the bitterness which may yet have been left in my soul by this unhappy history is now completely obscured by

³¹ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 66.

the benevolent hand of time.”³² Whether the episode left behind emotional scars and spoiled his efforts to play the part of a respectable *bourgeois*, as some have suggested, is difficult to say.³³ Most likely he had come to see it as a blessing in disguise, for the conviction had grown that Elisabeth Graun, not Coelestine, was his true soulmate in the world. Returning to Berlin from Königsberg, he had sketched a private memorandum in which he attempted to show by logical proofs that the two of them were meant to be together: “I am so thoroughly and completely harmonious with a certain woman that {it} may well be called a decidedly natural feature... We should therefore be married according to the rules and will of nature.” Only a young intellectual steeped in the readings of both Kant and Rousseau could have made a statement like this, and it was entirely typical of Gentz’s future relationships that his flirtation with Elisabeth ended in nothing more lasting than mutual profusions of eternal friendship.³⁴

The entire episode is only mildly interesting, at best. Readers who are drawn to the unfolding of Gentz’s intellectual legacy will likely be annoyed that nearly all his letters from this important period (1785-87) contain merely these awkward attempts at courtship, with no reflections on the looming crisis of the Bourbon monarchy in France, or on the implications of the death of Frederick the Great. Nonetheless, it is of use in the attempt to understand Gentz as a flesh-and-blood entity, as it reveals quite a bit of his evolving worldview at the end of the Old Regime.

³² *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 103-05.

³³ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 10.

³⁴ For her part, Elisabeth Graun divorced her husband in 1795 after a long separation and eventually married again, to Duke Gerson von Staegemann. Gentz ceased corresponding with her in 1793 with his marriage to Minna Gilly (see below). Coelestine Schwinck, meanwhile, went on to marry another civil servant by the name of Niederstetter and then, after divorcing him, the Swedish consul, one Koch. Beyond that, very little information about Gentz’s onetime fiancée survives; even the year of her death is unknown. *Briefe von und an Gentz* I, 2-5, 12-13.

That Gentz was clearly a highly intelligent man is undeniable. All subsequent scholars who have examined him have been in agreement on that, if on nothing else, but even their consensus is not necessary to reach this conclusion. Gentz's letters, especially those from his younger days in Berlin, reveal that like many caught up in the Enlightenment, he was highly interested in the sciences, "moral" as well as physical, and read treatises or attended lectures on disciplines as wide-ranging as chemistry, philosophy, and political economy whenever he got a chance. He was also an avid reader of all histories and political commentaries published in the German states as well as France and Britain, and thus at an early age was very attentive to the intellectual climate of Europe at large.³⁵ This and his pious upbringing produced in him, at least at this stage, an idealistic, even moralistic bent. Despite heavy flirtation with Elisabeth Graun, his letters to her also contain ruminations on virtue and suggestions on how she might improve herself—rather bold for a man barely into his twenties, but there can be little doubt of his sincerity.

To this extent, Gentz was entirely a reflection of the values that characterized *bürgerlich* Prussia, especially the French Huguenot community into which his mother was brought up: sobriety, industriousness, piety, duty, obedience. It was an inheritance to which his siblings held fast: his younger brother Heinrich (who would also embrace political conservatism as an adult) became an architect, gaining a certain degree of fame in his own right as *Baumeister* of Berlin, while Ludwig eventually went into the Prussian civil service, and his sisters had respectable middle-class marriages.³⁶ Yet the flashes of passion which appear in these letters of Friedrich's show a penchant for the artistic, the romantic, side of life, a penchant that would in time become

³⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 159, 169, 174.

³⁶ Heinrich Gentz was a significant enough figure in Berlin society to have been a literary subject himself. His life and career are covered in Adolph Doebber's *Heinrich Gentz, ein Berliner Baumeister um 1800* (Berlin: C. Heymann, 1916).

more pronounced. He had, and never entirely lost, a young man's belief in giving oneself entirely to a righteous cause, be it one of love or politics, and not shrinking from the clash of good and evil. This impetuous, single-minded streak did not wholly square with the "categorical imperative" and the rest of Kantian philosophy, and indeed much of Gentz's career, at least in the opinion of some scholars, could be interpreted as an effort to reconcile the two. For the moment, though, what needs emphasis is how these influences combined to create, in him as in so many others, an impatient young man chafing at the complex realities of Old Regime society and desirous of change.

In short, Gentz in the late 1780s was entirely typical of what is sometimes called the "new man." Historians have often remarked that the latter half of the eighteenth century belonged to this type: those individuals who, though not well-born, were able to climb the social ladder thanks to their intellectual, political, or economic talents. Examples could be seen throughout Europe but were most common in the more economically advanced and politically consolidated nations: Britain, France, and the larger German states. Examples include Jacques Necker, finance minister under Louis XVI, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (ennobled later in life), who aside from his poetry and novels was also a longtime adviser to the Duke of Weimar. Edmund Burke himself was an Irish-born commoner who had risen strictly on merit, as had his friend and later enemy, Charles James Fox. Even in the Mediterranean countries and in Russia (perhaps especially Russia, on second thought), cases of low-born men and women reaching the highest rungs of political power were frequent.³⁷ Only a comparative handful could make it so far, in any country, but as a group, they were fueling an intense cultural, especially literary,

³⁷ Opportunities for women were, of course, much more restricted in most cases; yet as the case of eighteenth-century Russia shows, it was not impossible for a woman to rise, through luck and adroit use of sexuality, into the royal family and even rule in her own right.

growth from 1750 onward, along with many advances in science and technology. As a result of all this, and of the increasing economic modernization taking place across the continent (albeit again mostly in the northern and western parts), it was clear that commoners possessing vision, skill, and intellect had it in their power to obtain more wealth and social clout than the most venerable nobles possessed.

Such men proliferated as the century continued, and provided much of the vitality in their countries. But they were equally a potential source of turbulence: they were aware of their talent, and could see that, on the face of it, they were best qualified to lead their various nations; yet on the Continent, at least, the structure of the absolutist regimes confined real political power to the monarchs and the nobles surrounding them, excluding those not born into that lofty rank.

Therefore, while the “new men” could on occasion hope to exercise some influence over those in power, they could not attain such power directly. (The much more fluid nature of society in England is often cited as one reason that country experienced far less revolutionary ferment.)³⁸ However talented they might be, in the “society of orders” they could not, with few exceptions, hope to have more than a secondary role.

Responses to this frustrating situation varied. Some were willing to play the game of Old Regime politics, as Goethe did, gaining the favor of a prince or noble adviser and having an indirect effect on policy, while others withdrew inward, joining private societies dedicated to moral regeneration, such as the Freemasons or the Illuminati; still others turned openly hostile and became part of what might be called the “counterculture”; Paris on the eve of the French Revolution was, as scholars have commented, filled with satirists and political hacks who did

³⁸ See E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance, and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), for a discussion of “new men” in contemporary Britain.

much to undermine Louis XVI's monarchy.³⁹ Despite their differences, though, many if not most desired a fundamental alteration in the constitution of their countries, one that would end absolutism and make the monarchy more receptive to the demands of "the people"—and at the same time, provide more opportunities for the intellectually gifted, such as themselves. The revolutionary potential of this group is clear enough in hindsight, yet at the time few would have advocated a violent overthrow of the status quo. What they preferred above all was a fairer division (from their perspective) of the proverbial pie, to be conducted via peaceful and enlightened reform.

Although questions of politics and social reform are virtually absent from his correspondence at this time, there can be little doubt that Gentz himself fell into this category. After returning to Berlin from the university, he had become involved in the intellectual scene, frequently appearing at the literary salon of Henriette Herz (1761-1847), one of the most prestigious in the capital and one often visited by other young lights, including the von Humboldt brothers, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, and others.⁴⁰ He also became part of a so-called "Wednesday Club" that included "ecclesiastical bigwigs whose religious faith was nebulous and sophisticated, scholars who recommended abolition of the universities, ministers of state who found no fault with the demands of the Third Estate in France, and men of law who strove to give the Prussian legal code then in preparation a foundation that was reminiscent of Rousseau's republicanism."⁴¹ The young man was sufficiently involved in this circle to occasionally host its meetings, and as his early letters to Garve show, was of the definite opinion that a properly

³⁹ For examples of lower-class writers in Old Regime Europe, see Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁴⁰ Henriette Herz's memoirs, *Ihr Leben und Ihr Erinnerungen*, are a must-read for those wishing to understand Berlin high society and intellectual culture during this period.

⁴¹ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 10.

constituted state was based on law and moral principle, not the whims of the monarch. As a student of Kant, no doubt he felt he understood those principles better than the men of the Hohenzollern court, and the fact that he continued to be their social inferior, confined to a life of bureaucratic scribbling, rankled. Golo Mann, who wrote a history of Gentz at mid-century, draws from this an interesting conclusion regarding his lifestyle, which at times could only be described as hedonistic: “His inordinate love of amusement was unconquerable, for he suffered from his inferior social position and wanted to show the world how meanly and deceitfully it was treating him; and, too, he really enjoyed his qualms of conscience, the feeling that he was better and purer than his deeds.”⁴² This would make much of his personal conduct more explicable.

By 1789, then, Friedrich Gentz was showing the split personality that would be evident for the rest of his life: the coolly rational, bourgeois, occasionally prudish, man of the *Aufklärung* on the one hand, and the inconstant, passionate, foppish, would-be courtier on the other. Whether he would have had a successful career as a cog in the Prussian bureaucracy, under any set of circumstances, is far from clear: perhaps not, as he was experiencing friction as a bureaucrat in any event. The circumstances which *did* transpire, however, helped to fatally wreck this career path. Revolution and war were on the horizon, and would soon disrupt all of Europe. They would also open another avenue to Gentz: that of the polemicist and *Schriftsteller*.

⁴² Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 13.

Chapter 2

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/And to be young was very heaven,” wrote the poet William Wordsworth (like Gentz, soon to become a bitter enemy of what he first praised) in his *The Prelude*, looking back on the French Revolution in 1797.⁴³ This seminal event is commonly, and rightly, regarded as a pivotal moment in the development of modern Europe, and indeed the whole world. This was as true of Germany as anywhere else. If its political consequences were not felt there for several years, until the Coalition wars of the 1790s, the impact on the minds of many Germans, especially among the intellectual class, was immediate. An apocryphal story has it that Immanuel Kant’s daily walks through the streets of Königsberg were only disrupted twice: when he read Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and when he heard of the fall of the Bastille. What is certain is that he immediately embraced the Revolution, and unlike many contemporaries, never lost faith in its potential. He and other thinkers left no doubt, in those heady days of 1789-90, that events in France marked the birth of a new era of liberty and human progress. The young Romantic poet Ludwig Tieck wrote of the revolutionary cause, “Were France to fail, I should despise the whole world.” Klopstock and Wieland wrote numerous poems in support of the Revolution as well. The contemporary historian Johannes Weitzel suggested that it was the completion of the process of human freedom that the Protestant Reformation had begun. Intellectuals were hardly the only Germans caught up in the excitement, of course: aristocratic and middle-class women in cities like Hamburg began wearing red, white, and blue gowns to show solidarity with the French, and one magistrate in Kant’s university town, Theodor Hippel, though very much a representative of the established order, urged the destruction of inequality

⁴³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), Book I.

among the sexes, in the same fashion as the Bastille had been destroyed.⁴⁴ With such widespread fascination in events in France, it was little wonder that the Berlin journalist Johann Wilhelm Archenholtz remarked, in the summer of 1789, that “The tremendous interest aroused by the French Revolution crowds out all other concerns; the best poems remain unread, men are interested only in newspapers and in writings which satisfy their voracious political appetite.”⁴⁵

Why this general outpouring of support for the Revolution by Germans? It would be tempting to explain their reaction in terms of a desire for liberty at home, for the casting off of the yoke of absolutism, for the introduction of Enlightenment values, and so on. There is, to be sure, some support for this interpretation. By the late eighteenth century, most Germans (perhaps most Europeans) who thought about the world had a sense that the old and tried paths no longer sufficed, that new ways of thinking about political and social institutions were needed. Given the flourishing of the *Aufklärung*, it was natural that these new ways were to be based on reason and idealism. Looking back long afterward, the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel described the spirit of 1789 thus:

All of a sudden, the Idea, the conception of Right, asserted its authority, and the old framework of injustice was established in harmony with the idea of Right, and everything was henceforth to be based on this foundation...now had man advanced to the recognition of the principle that thought ought to govern spiritual reality....All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch.⁴⁶

The interest in the dramatic changes taking place in France had long roots, including but not limited to the Enlightenment. Some, notably the German historical theorist Reinhart Koselleck, have made reference to “the acceleration of history,” a change in the perception of historical time in which more people began to believe that history was moving forward toward

⁴⁴ Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 230.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁴⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke* (Berlin, 1840), vol. IX, 535-6.

some goal. This in turn produced a general belief that change was not only inevitable but necessary. Numerous examples of this belief can be found in the art and literature of the time.⁴⁷ Gotthold Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, for example, features the exploitation of a virtuous citizenry by a lawless and selfish aristocracy, and without calling for a specific political program, certainly creates for German audiences a negative image of absolutism, a system rooted in the past and out of touch with the new thinking.⁴⁸ Nor were members of the "thinking classes" the only Germans to feel the stir of revolution. As the short-lived uprising in Saxony in the fall of 1789 and other disturbances elsewhere over the next year or two suggest, there were many peasants and townsmen who might not grasp the political principles espoused in the salons, but they certainly understood resentment of things like noble privilege, and could ape the French slogans.⁴⁹

On the other hand, support for the ideals of the revolutionaries in France did not in most cases translate into a desire for such upheaval at home. The most widely expressed sentiment among Germans was that creation of a National Assembly and a new constitution might be suitable for the French situation, but not for the very different Holy Roman Empire. As stated earlier, most members of the *Aufklärung* were a part of the established order, not alienated from

⁴⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 145-51.

⁴⁸ Gotthold Lessing, *Emilia Galotti: Ein Trauerspiel in Fünf Aufzügen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1985).

⁴⁹ The Saxon revolt of 1790 was triggered by bad weather and crop failures as well as long-simmering resentment against landlords, and not by French instigation; its leaders were at least somewhat aware of proceedings in France, though, and consciously mimicked such revolutionary actions by demanding the abolition of serfdom and creation of a civic guard, among other things. The uprisings involved up to ten thousand armed peasants but were quickly crushed by the government. The classic account of the revolt is Percy Stulz and Alfred Opitz, *Volksbewegungen in Kursachsen zur Zeit der Französischen Revolution* (East Berlin, 1956); Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, also has a thumbnail sketch, 442-46. Saxony was not the only part of Germany to see unrest at this time. There was some rioting by weavers in the central states, a general strike by journeyman artisans in Hamburg in 1791, as well as demands by Silesian serfs demanding emancipation, for which the army eventually had to be sent in. Gentz makes no reference to this, so far as is known, so what reaction he had to this last, if any, is unknown.

it, and tended to believe they could achieve their ends through gradual, peaceful reform, not crisis and revolution. As the violence in France mounted, the philologist Johann Gottfried Herder perhaps summed up his countrymen's thoughts best when he said that the Germans would observe the Revolution as one observes a shipwreck from shore.⁵⁰

As best as can be determined, Friedrich Gentz was practically at one with his fellow Germans in his initial reaction to the French Revolution. From the critical year 1789, only a very few of his letters survive, and while he did discuss abstract questions of political philosophy, nowhere did he make any direct reference to events in France. On the other hand, Henriette Herz, at whose Berlin salon Gentz was often a guest, later wrote in her memoirs that he talked about the Revolution a great deal, so it is fair to assume that if we had more of his letters from this time, the picture would be quite different.⁵¹ The letters of 1790 and '91, however, did address the Revolution at length, and every indication is that the young bureaucrat approved entirely of events thus far—the formation of the National Assembly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the march on Versailles, etc.

Most of these letters were to Christian Garve, to whom Gentz revealed his outright exuberance for the Revolution. A missive of March 1790 left no doubt of his mood or his principles. Though events in France were not mentioned directly, the young man made it clear that he had been following them for quite some time and that he felt a great enthusiasm for progress and change and his belief that such change would be overwhelmingly positive, provided it were done in an idealistic manner. At one point, he said to Garve,

Let my heart and my pen run free for just a few moments. Call it fanaticism, or hyperbole, or whatever you wish. But I must speak. Let me solemnly ask you, in the name of our age, of the increasing freedom and happiness in our race, of the

⁵⁰ George P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London: Longmans, 1920), 167; see also Koppel Pinson, *Modern Germany: Its History and Civilization* (New York, 1966), 28.

⁵¹ *Henriette Herz: Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, ed. J. Fürst (Berlin: Hertz, 1858), 137-41.

long, alas, the far too long-oppressed humanity, and of the national pride, which cannot bear for our neighbors alone to be wise, not to let go of the work on the policy, just now as great, glorious, important, and fruitful as it can be.⁵²

Going on to refer to Garve as a man who teaches sovereigns their duties and can similarly teach peoples their rights, Gentz clearly viewed change and the process of enlightenment as a rational process, something unfolding under the tutelage of wise philosophers (such as Garve) who would calmly instill reason and virtue into the masses, not swayed by partisanship or passions of their own. Gentz acknowledged that his own youth and ardor had a great deal to do with this viewpoint, adding later, “Forgive me for this terrible intrusiveness. The spirit of the age blows strong and vibrant in me...I am young, and thus feel the general aspiration for freedom, which breaks out on all sides with sympathy and warmth.”⁵³

There is no cause to doubt the sincerity of Gentz’s stance at this juncture as a believer in human progress and Enlightenment ideals. He wrote, in a very Frederician tone, “A ruler, according to my principles, ought to have no more ability to impose his own rights than a private individual might have. For what is the ruler supposed to be? The first servant of the state.” More to the point, he urged Garve not to neglect a translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* he had been intending to publish, writing that only Garve could “show the world that the Germans know as well as other nations what a society, a people, a ruler, a law, a right, slavery, and freedom are.”⁵⁴

⁵² *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 157-58. In this letter, Gentz complained of firsthand material on the Revolution not being readily available until the recent arrival of one of his Ancillon cousins from France with a number of recently published books and pamphlets. His next letter (December 1790) noted in passing that the printed minutes of the National Assembly’s proceedings were scarcely to be found in Berlin, costing some 80-100 Taler a year and therefore out of his reach at the moment. This scarcity may account for the previous lack of mention of the Revolution in his correspondence.

⁵³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 158-59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 151, 158.

In his next letter to Garve, in December 1790, Gentz discussed at fuller length the events in France. For the first time, he informed his old teacher that he had lately been trying his hand at writing and publishing a summary of the various arguments for and against the revolutionaries' introduction of a new form of currency, the assignat. Gentz himself seemed to believe this new paper money was on balance a good idea, though he obliquely acknowledged that many in and out of France were skeptical of it. Financial matters failed to dampen his enthusiasm, however:

I am not yet disposed to despair of the good cause. The failure of this revolution I would regard as one of the worst misfortunes ever to affect the human race. It is the first practical triumph of philosophy, the first example of a form of government to be founded on principles and on a coherent, consistent system. It is the hope and solace for so many ills under which humanity sighs. Were this revolution to retreat, all these evils would become ten times worse. I can vividly imagine the silent despair with which reason would regard defiance, its admission that people can only be happy as slaves, and how tyrants large and small would use this awful confession in order to avenge the terror instilled in them by the awakening of the French nation.⁵⁵

This passage is repeated verbatim in many modern texts as representative of German public opinion during the early stages of the French Revolution—understandably so, as an organized counter-revolutionary camp was not yet visible.⁵⁶ Certainly it reflected the sentiment among many young intellectuals, as shown by the Tieck quote above. It was the expression of a man who had accepted, more or less at face value, all the tenets of Revolutionary ideology: the human race has heretofore dwelled in darkness and misery (more than a touch of Rousseau, there); all previous governments are irrational and thus of questionable legitimacy; the people are slaves but they have now discovered liberty; to fail now would usher humanity into a new Dark Age of ignorance and oppression. It is hard, reading this, to believe that it came from the same man who

⁵⁵ *Briefe*, I, 178-79.

⁵⁶ Including James Sheehan, *German History: 1770-1866*, 211-12; Eric Dorn Brose, *German History 1789-1871: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Bismarckian Reich* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1997), 24; Epstein, *Genesis of German Conservatism*, 436; Pinson, *Modern Germany*, 26, also makes mention.

only a few years later would write glowingly of Burke's blast against the Revolution. Still, a good deal of his consistent style comes through in this early letter. As in his later writings, he was passionate, toward both individuals and principles, and able to completely throw himself into the defense of a cause of whose justice he was convinced.

Gentz did acknowledge (in response to what Garve had earlier written him) that there was much "folly and confusion" in what the revolutionaries were doing.⁵⁷ Like any good apologist, though, he contended that much of it had been exaggerated if not outright fabricated by unreliable German newspapers, and most of what was true was understandable, given the miserable state to which France had been reduced by its monarchy and nobility. Publications openly opposed to the Revolution were either misinformed or (as in the case of the *Mercure de France*, whose editor, Mallet du Pan, he would later serve as a translator for and hold in very high regard) hopelessly partisan. The success of the Revolution, he argued, was and ought to be the object of all wise heads, whatever bumps might occur along the way.⁵⁸

These are rather general statements about the Revolution, without much explanation of exactly what in it Gentz approved. There are, however, many comments from him that hint at the specific policies he desired. His March 1790 letter mentioned that the issues of the *Journal de Provence*, a periodical by the Comte de Mirabeau, had just arrived in Berlin, as had Jean-Joseph Mounier's *Exposé de la conduite de Mounier*, writings by publicist Nicolas Bergasse and the Marquis de Lally-Tollendal, and much else.⁵⁹ What did these men have in common? Mirabeau, Mounier, Bergasse, and Lally-Tollendal had all advocated giving France a constitution along the lines of that in Britain, with a bicameral legislature holding joint sovereignty with the King,

⁵⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 148-49..

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 171-73, 178.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 157.

regular elections for and sessions of said legislature, and ministers at least partly responsible to it rather than to the monarch alone. Such efforts had already failed by now, but Mirabeau, still near the height of his power in France, and the others continued to stand for moderate, reformist revolution. Gentz's admiration for their ideas would only grow as he further immersed himself in their work, but his preference is already clear.

It can be said with fair certainty, then, and most commentators have agreed, that Gentz's early enthusiasm for the Revolution was genuine and lasted until 1791 or maybe 1792. The Revolution's most violent phase was still a long way off, and while such controversial legislation as the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, to have such serious long-term consequences, was passing through the National Assembly at this time, it was not as attention-grabbing as the happenings of 1789; and while sporadic episodes of violence occurred, they did not from a distance appear to be endemic to the Revolution. Therefore, to see it as a success and an entirely beneficial one, and to be passionate in its defense, was not only possible but commonplace.

It was in this vein that Gentz made his first foray into the publishing world with his *Über den Ursprung und die obersten Prinzipien des Rechts*, which appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in April 1791. This was written in response to the Osnabrück scholar Justus Möser (1720-94), who the previous June had published an article in that same publication, *Über das Recht der Menschheit als den Grund der französischen Konstitution*. In it, he denounced revolutionary principles and mocked ideas such as the "rights of man."⁶⁰ Möser was in many ways far more of an instinctual conservative than Gentz; a thinker still attached to the particularism and corporatism of the Holy Roman Empire. For him, rights did not exist in the abstract, only in clearly established legal relationships such as those which defined the various

⁶⁰ Justus Möser, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. B. R. Abeken (10 vols., Berlin, 1842-43), V, 190-95.

communities within the Empire. In particular, he argued that rights were tied to property ownership. Those in a given community who possessed little or no property had no stake in its continuation, and so could not (according to Möser) be admitted to full citizenship.⁶¹

Taking issue with this dismissive stance, Gentz argued that all civil rights were, in fact, derived from man's basic natural rights: unlimited power over oneself, right to property, and right to the upholding of contracts. These natural rights could not be enjoyed unless codified in positive law—that is, civil rights—making this the fundamental purpose of any state. In language that might make Gentz look like a Libertarian Party candidate today, he contended that the state's sole goal should be to allow its citizens the greatest degree of freedom possible. One must be restrained in one's freedom, of course, but only to the extent that one could not infringe on the freedoms of others. Hence, the rights of man can be rationally deduced and are universally applicable. In sharp contrast to much of his later political thought, Gentz flatly rejected "historicism," the idea that rights had evolved over time in step with the development of political communities, a doctrine just coming into its own in Germany. For this same reason, he rejected Möser's description of the state as a "joint-stock company," in which one's rights were commensurate with one's contributions to the common good. This, Gentz argued, amounted to a justification of unequal rights. The poorest laborer contributed to the state, as well as the richest baron or merchant, and ought to receive equal protection of his liberties.⁶² Very Kantian in its

⁶¹ Many of the differences between Gentz and Möser stemmed from their differences of origin. Whereas Gentz was a product of centralized, absolutist Prussia, Möser came from (and died in) humble Osnabrück, a relatively "backward" city-state where the estates were still powerful. The sense Möser possessed (as Gentz did not) of belonging to a particular place gave him a different sort of conservatism, one not tied to the Aufklärung or to Frederician absolutism. Indeed, in this and certain other respects Möser is the German thinker most in line with Edmund Burke. Two of the best works on this lesser-known theorist are Otto Halzig, *Justus Möser als Staatsmann und Publizist* (Hannover and Leipzig, 1909) and Heinz Zimmermann, *Staat, Recht und Wirtschaft bei Möser* (Jena, 1933).

⁶² Gentz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Günther Kronenbitter (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1998), VII, 7-34.

reasoning, the essay was received well enough that he began to think he had a future commentating on political philosophy, and from then on began delving into all documents and treatises having to do with the Revolution more seriously.

From 1789 up to the spring of 1791, then, Gentz's opinions on the Revolution are rather easy to trace. It is at this point, however, that the historian encounters a very serious gap. The surviving correspondence between April 1791 and the beginning of 1793, when Gentz published his first anti-revolutionary treatises, does not at all deal directly with the unfolding political situation; if any letters ever did, their location is unknown. We know that he had been working on this literature for several months, so that his pivot against the Revolution had occurred no later than the summer or autumn of 1792, and possibly earlier, but this still leaves a space of well over a year to explain. Clearly, a major change took place in his consideration of the Revolution, as he was still on balance supportive of it in the spring of 1791. The loss of his correspondence with Garve is particularly grievous, since it was there that the young man revealed so much of his thought.⁶³

This gap in evidence has left scholars to explain his shift rightward as best they can, and some, looking at the timing of events at this juncture, have viewed it as at least partly opportunistic. Biographer Paul Sweet, for example, said of Gentz that “to a certain extent he reflected the attitude of the Prussian government during the early 1790s. He had changed his own opinion of the Revolution just when Prussia shifted from alert neutrality to outright war, and his translation of Burke’s *Reflections* had been timed exactly right for a favorable reception in the

⁶³ From a review of his printed correspondence, I am certain that more letters to and from Gentz exist than are now available to us. The Garve letters alone are proof of that; after April 1791, no writings to his old teacher are to be found until 1798, yet there is no apology for or mention of a break in communication; the content of the letters resumes mid-conversation, as it were. Other letters, therefore, must at one time have existed; but whether they were destroyed or simply lost is impossible to say.

higher Prussian governmental circles.”⁶⁴ The biographical sketch left by Henriette Herz, who was rather close to him, makes no mention of the political ambition this implies; she did seem to believe, however, that his increasing financial difficulties led him to curry favor with those “governmental circles.”⁶⁵

Such arguments ought to be taken seriously. Gentz by 1791 was far from a content man. He was indeed beginning to face problems with debt, although this was by no means as pressing an issue then as it would later become. Beyond mere questions of money, however, he was clearly dissatisfied with his job. He had already complained that the mountains of paperwork at the General Directory often kept him from reading the newspapers and periodicals he clearly preferred.⁶⁶ (The taxation and budgetary records he had to pore through stood him in good stead later when he wrote on financial affairs, but he could not appreciate that at the time.) Now he was clashing with his bureau chief, Otto Friedrich von Voss, an older bureaucrat who Gentz despised as a cruel taskmaster. Irked, he applied to Friedrich Wilhelm II in February 1791 for an appointment as magistrate in Breslau, but was denied.⁶⁷ Saddled with what appeared to be a “dead-end job,” his financial solvency in question, Gentz may well have felt that the only way out of his impasse was to curry favor with the King and his leading ministers by denouncing the Revolution in print, which would prove him a good monarchist while also impressing the powers that be with a display of his intellect and writing skill. So, at least, runs the argument put forward by Herz, and later by Sweet and others.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 29. However, Sweet also states that Gentz’s turn against the Revolution was partly fueled by a desire to protect the eighteenth-century society he saw threatened.

⁶⁵ Henriette Herz, *Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, 137-41.

⁶⁶ He was hardly alone in this, as the bureaucracy was frequently criticized for reading such materials on the job.

⁶⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 158, 190-91, 194-97.

⁶⁸ Some have been cruder about this than others. The worst example is probably the German Marxist Hermann Klenner, who wrote, “Suffice to say that there then occurred in Berlin, as in all periods of fermenting

Given the lack of strong evidence to refute the charge that personal motives were involved in Gentz's turnabout (assuming such evidence could be found at all, for the personal and the political are rarely totally separate), it would be wrong, then, to dismiss these accusations.⁶⁹ By the same token, though, to suggest, as these accusations implicitly do, that Gentz did not object on principle to the more recent developments of the Revolution, that he was not deeply shocked by them, would also be an injustice. For if the timing of his switch did coincide with the increasingly hostile stance of the Prussian government, it was also simultaneous with the Revolution's radicalization, and with the further explosion of violence that was always at that event's core.

The year 1792 constituted a turning point in many contemporaries' views of the French Revolution. The Republic was declared in that year, seemingly sweeping away the last remnants of the Old Regime; for the first time, Louis XVI and the royal family were clearly revealed as prisoners and soon-to-be victims of the revolutionaries; and the new government showed that it could stand up to absolutist powers such as Prussia and Austria. Far more vivid in the impressions they left, however, were such events as the September Massacres, in which hundreds

conflict, the degeneration of a thinker into a traitor," without quite explaining in what way Gentz was a traitor. By contrast, Herz and other friends of Gentz from his Berlin days remembered him fondly while also clearly believing he had made the wrong choices. See Klenner, "Frankreichs Revolution und Deutschlands Konservatismus," in *Die Französische Revolution 1789-1989*. Revolutionstheorie heute. Marxistische Studien. Jahrbuch des IMSF 14 (1988), 398.

⁶⁹ Frederick Beiser gives another personality-based explanation: that Gentz's careless, "man-about-town" lifestyle came to an end in 1792 after an unhappy fling with a Berlin actress, after which he "now regretted his wicked past and decided to mend his ways," beginning to pattern his behavior after respectable society; "this change in lifestyle accounted for his new political opinions: it was as if...his new conservatism were a defense of the more conventional society he had now decided to join." This argument, which Beiser got largely from the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt, is patently untrue. As will be noted below, even a cursory perusal of Gentz's own letters and diary entries demonstrates that his personal behavior did not undergo a fundamental alteration at any time during the 1790s. He might have upbraided himself a bit for his conduct in this period, but he did that lots of times. The flow of external political events must be given far more emphasis when examining Gentz's political transformation. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 318-19.

of prisoners, of varying social rank, were brutally murdered in the Paris jails. The killings, which included a number of high nobles as well as many lowly felons and prostitutes, may not have been as barbaric as later counter-revolutionary literature made them out to be, but they were quite bad enough for all that.

How soon or how much Gentz knew of these latter events is uncertain; in any case, he was already preparing his publication of Burke when they occurred, so that they would not have precipitated (though they may have confirmed) his break with the Revolution. What he would have known for sure, long before this point, was that the faction within the National Assembly urging a “British” model on the government, the group of which he had spoken so highly, was defunct. Mirabeau was dead and Mounier and Lally-Tollendal had been discredited and gone into exile—the one to Weimar, the other to England. The Revolution had passed into the hands of the radical Jacobin party, and assiduously following the latest reports from France as he was, Gentz could not have failed to notice that they were being driven by extremism and violent passion, rather than by the high-minded ideals of liberty he had formerly praised. Whether any of this placed him in the royalist camp is hard to say. In 1800 he would describe Louis XVI as one of the most benevolent kings in history, whose only fault was his excessive mildness, but a lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.⁷⁰ But even in 1792, he could not disguise from himself the fact that the Revolution seemed in danger of degenerating into mob rule and demagoguery, if it had not done so already; as a man of the law-abiding *burgher* class, priding itself on enlightened reason and with much to lose in such a situation, this could not be other than anathema to him.

⁷⁰ Gentz, *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickins, 1800), 53.

If this was indeed the dynamic that pushed Gentz away from full-throated support of the Revolution, it was reinforced by some of the acquaintances he made in the early 1790s. Chief among these was the young aristocrat and fellow man of letters, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). Soon to become famous as a linguist and pioneer in education, Humboldt, at the time of their first meeting in 1790, had just completed his university training and returned to Berlin from a visit to Paris, where he had seen the Revolution unfolding firsthand. As both men frequented the city's salons, Gentz soon made the acquaintance of Humboldt (and also of his younger brother, the naturalist Alexander, with whom he occasionally corresponded in later years).⁷¹

Described by some who knew him as arrogant and aloof, Humboldt at first did not care for Gentz, once referring to him as a “windbag.” However, he was impressed by the young bureaucrat’s intelligence and perceptiveness, and relations between the two quickly became much friendlier and more intimate. Humboldt shortly afterward told Friedrich Schiller that Gentz possessed “the most thoughtful head of any man in Berlin,” while for his part, Gentz wrote of the “almost burdensome admiration” he felt for Humboldt.⁷² The two remained in contact throughout their lives, but were especially close at this time, and had many long conversations on a variety of topics--philosophy, art, literature, and the events in France. Having seen the Revolution up close and personal, as Gentz had not, Humboldt had become very skeptical of where it was headed, writing in a letter of August 1791 (he had left Berlin by now) that the revolutionary ideals were inherently flawed. “Constitutions cannot be grafted on men like shoots

⁷¹ For a sketch of Humboldt’s life, consult Paul Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography*. 2 vols (Athens: Ohio State University, 1980).

⁷² Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 18; *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 183.

on trees...When time and nature have not been at work, it is like tying blossoms on branches with string. With the first heat of midday they melt.”⁷³

The friendships Gentz developed during his life tended, like many friendships involving intellectually creative men, to include initial bursts of enthusiasm for everything his new acquaintance said and did. He could not have done other than to take Humboldt’s skeptical attitude very seriously. At any rate, Gentz began showing signs of distancing himself from his earlier positions by arranging to have Humboldt’s letter published in the *Monatsschrift*.⁷⁴ This is not to say he was an acolyte or agent for his aristocratic friend; more likely, he thought the latter’s words ought to be laid before the broader intellectual community. The main point is that Gentz was now in contact with and reacting to views differing sharply from his own initial optimism.

This brings us to his relationship with Edmund Burke, which did so much to mark Gentz as a leading counter-revolutionary figure. Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had appeared in 1790 and was immediately a political bombshell, both in Britain and on the Continent. The American conservative writer Russell Kirk later claimed that Burke had single-handedly killed enthusiasm for the Revolution in many quarters and turned British opinion against it; this is almost certainly an exaggeration, but it is hard to argue when he credits the Whig with having “checked in Britain an enthusiasm for French innovation; presently made possible Pitt’s rallying of British patriotism against France; and then inspired a reaction against levelling principles which kept the English constitution almost unaltered during four decades.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Eine Auswahl aus seinen politischen Schriften*, ed. Siegfried Kaehler (Berlin, 1922), 5. This organic view of society, incidentally, was one shared by Möser, and like him anticipated the historicist approach popular with 19th-century German scholars.

⁷⁴ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 20.

⁷⁵ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1985), 24.

Burke was already widely known as a champion of what we call classical liberalism, so much so that Mirabeau had previously read his House of Commons speeches to the National Assembly, to general applause. This reputation ensured that *Reflections* quickly received a great deal of attention and became a very controversial book. Many who had warmly praised the Revolution, like the Scottish Whig Sir James Mackintosh (later a correspondent with Gentz) were first appalled, then converted by the rhetorical power of Burke's arguments. Others of more radical opinion vented their outrage at what they saw as Burke's betrayal of the ideas that had led to the Revolution--not understanding that he himself saw *Reflections* as a continuation of the principles he had expressed--and at the vehement language he deployed, at one point saying all that was good in France had been "cast under the hooves of a swinish multitude."⁷⁶

Gentz came across the book in March or April 1791, and was at first ambivalent about it--he liked its style more than its substance. "Certainly this man deserves, if ever anyone did, to have his masterful manner of speech clearly conveyed," he wrote to Garve. "Opposed as I am to its principles and the conclusions from those principles...I read this book with incalculably greater pleasure than a hundred shallow eulogies to the Revolution." His letter does not suggest that he was then thinking of undertaking a translation of Burke; he was merely commenting on what he had read lately, as he had done for dozens of other authors.⁷⁷

What happened to change this, and to make Gentz not only Burke's translator but staunch supporter, we can only guess at. Gentz himself implied a combined influence of *Reflections* and the events it seemed to have accurately predicted. He wrote one letter to Burke himself, in February 1793, informing him of the German translation's imminent publication. Lauding the Whig in a few paragraphs which showed he was not yet completely facile in English, Gentz at

⁷⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68.

⁷⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 203-4.

one point remarked, “Nay, I was bold enough to entertain a doubt against a very few of Your opinions: much oftener I ought to reinforce what Your experience, what Your consummated wisdom foretold us two years ago, by what the sad history of these last two years is compelled to remember.” Later, in 1794, he wrote that “The last and most terrible period of the French Revolution...began with the horrors of the 10th of August [1792, i.e. the overthrow of the monarchy].” From this, at least, it does seem that external events drove his ideological shift.⁷⁸

To consider what impressed him about *Reflections*, though, it will be useful here to briefly review the main points of Burke’s argument. They included the following:

-The French Revolution as it has progressed up to this time (1790) has been a disastrous mistake, not because there was nothing about absolutist France in need of reform—plainly there was, though there was also much about it to be valued and preserved—but because the National Assembly had ignored the kingdom’s traditional political, legal, and social constitutions in favor of abstract doctrines and formulas which had never been practiced and were probably impracticable.

-Violent, extralegal revolution such as what ensued in France in 1789 should be regarded with fear, not praise. This type of action may on occasion be a sad necessity, but it should always be a last resort, and only carried out against true tyrants who are actively subverting the laws of the realm and deliberately harming its constituents. To place in such a category Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette—not archetypes of oppression but flesh-and-blood actors with much the same

⁷⁸ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. P. J. Marshall and John A. Woods, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), Vol. VII, 346-47. This is one of the few letters in which Gentz writes in English. He could certainly read and understand the language very well by this time—he may have begun learning it at the Joachimsthal Gymnasium in his adolescence, or during his later philosophic endeavors—but rarely employed it himself apart from a few scattered phrases. French was, of course, the language commonly used by elites and men of letters during the era, but the fact that he did not always use it even when writing to English acquaintances during his 1802 visit to England suggests that his fluency was passive rather than active.

virtues and vices as anyone else, and who tried to be mild and conscientious rulers—is not just false but insulting.

-While there may be much to criticize in the constitution of any nation, those who wish to do so, whatever their motives, ought to think well before they do, for it is not only the accumulation of centuries of countless human endeavors, of slow, trial-and-error progress; it is the chief safeguard of such order, prosperity, and civic virtue as that nation enjoys. Violate the constitution, tear it up in favor of one created by the “metaphysicians” Burke detested, and everything else, from the national economy to one’s own household, will become unstable.⁷⁹

-When such a revolution as that in France is attempted, Burke predicted (with telling accuracy), its leadership will not fall into the hands of the noble, the wise, or the gifted. There will be “leaders,” sure enough, but having called up the mob to perform such feats as the storming of Versailles or the Bastille, they will be unable to put it back down, and in fact will become its playthings. They will generally be cowed men, of no better quality than those they serve, and will oblige the crowd’s every whim until someone bolder than the rest comes forth to put the mob down by force and set himself up as the new ruler. (It is something of a pity that Burke did not live quite long enough to see the rise of Napoleon.)

-Finally, in a point especially echoed by future generations of conservative thinkers, Burke argued that there was an inescapable connection between personal freedom and economic freedom—specifically, freedom of property. Property, in land or in goods, was a surer route to liberty and independence than any proclamation of the “rights of man” could ever be, and a government which dictated what a man might do with his property dictated his life. It is hard to be sure what Burke would have said about the Industrial Revolution in the near future, raising as

⁷⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 35, 155, 190.

it did questions about inequalities of wealth, but his opposition to any regime which claimed power over property was unyielding.

Such were the rules for government Friedrich Gentz gleaned from his first readings of *Reflections*. If it is not surprising that to an idealistic young man of twenty-six or twenty-seven who had absorbed the early Romanticism of Goethe, Klopstock, and Rousseau, the passion and high-mindedness of the Revolution should seem very appealing, nor should it be astonishing that a middle-class bureaucrat, tied to the status quo, and a student of rationalist philosophy might yield to this dash of cold water. Of course, Burke could become very emotional himself, as in his overwrought defense of Marie Antoinette, and probably Gentz found this no more convincing than did other critics.⁸⁰ But the historical comparisons, legal precedents, and arguments about constitutional evolution, together with the warnings about the breakdown in law and order and the insecurity of property, were very compelling indeed.

Equally potent were Burke's warnings about the dangers of reckless fanaticism, manifestations of which could be seen in France in 1789 but especially from 1792 onward, as the Jacobin government began to export revolutionary doctrines to neighboring states by force of arms. Like many Germans, Gentz had read Friedrich Schiller's recently-published *History of the Thirty Years' War*, which singled out for blame not religious discord per se but rather the extreme behavior incited in the different parties by their religion. "Religious fanaticism anticipates even the remotest dangers," Schiller had written; "Enthusiasm never calculates its sacrifices. What the most pressing danger of the state could not gain from the citizens, was effected by religious zeal."⁸¹ The frequency with which Gentz, especially in his early treatises

⁸⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 65.

⁸¹ Friedrich Schiller, *The History of the Thirty Years' War*, (New York: Harvard Publishing Co., 1895), 11.

against the Revolution, rails against the dangers of “*Enthusiasmus*” or “*Schwärmerei*” strongly suggests that he had taken Burke and Schiller to heart, and had come to see the Revolution as a sort of counterfeit religion.⁸² Nor was he alone in this.

That said, it is not to be thought that Gentz became a reflexive disciple of Burke on all points; he was not, then or later. One does not have to read the two men’s writings too closely to find a discrepancy on the “first principles,” one might say, of each. For example, religion never played as strong a part in Gentz’s philosophy as it did in Burke’s. He thought it was important, to be sure, but chiefly as a means of strengthening the social order and protecting morality, not necessarily as a thing in and of itself. This is perhaps understandable in a young man of thirty, but even later in life, when he was flirting with Catholicism, Gentz made his priorities clear. In the course of an 1813 letter to Metternich, he remarked that “there must be belief again, there must be obedience again, there must be a thousand times less reasoning than now, or there can no longer be government.” Six years later, while drafting the reactionary Karlsbad Decrees, he wrote to his friend, Adam Müller: “Religion has to be restored, if civil organization is to continue to exist...I know that no moral and therefore no political order in the world can exist, if means are not found to bind the reason of everyone, and if the fatal pretension, by virtue of which everybody wants to look upon his own reason as absolute, is not again banned in human society.”⁸³ In other words, the chief virtue of religion was its status as an ordering principle, not necessarily the truth of its beliefs. To be sure, Burke was in agreement about this positive quality, but he was more genuinely pious: he was a devout Christian mainly because he believed his faith to be true, and argued that it upheld the social order precisely because the latter was

⁸² *Ausgewählte Schriften von Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Wilderich Weick (Leipzig: 1838), I, xviii, xxi-xxii.

⁸³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 104.

itself a reflection of the divine order.⁸⁴ This quasi-theological speculation was beyond Gentz—especially when it came to religion, perhaps, he never let go of his early Enlightenment beliefs. During the period of his “conversion,” one might say, to Burkean principles, he showed no hostility toward individual skeptics or atheists, so far as is known. When writing in September 1792 to his friend Karl Gustav von Brinckmann, a Swedish diplomat given to irreligion, he remarked chidingly that “your denial of God is not at all wickedness, but only of a piece with the stupidity with which you gainsay [Samuel] Johnson and venerate Lessing as an idol.”⁸⁵ His position regarding religion was substantively the same as those of Voltaire, or his old mentor Kant: Christianity might or might not be true, but it was necessary for the majority to continue believing it was to keep them honest and law-abiding.

But there was an equally important distinction between Gentz and Burke. For Burke, political order was a consequence and a creation of human society; “Government,” he wrote in *Reflections*, “is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants.”⁸⁶ If the society was healthy and self-regulating, there was less of a need for a powerful state. In this, he followed the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages. Gentz was not entirely deaf to this sort of view, but in his writings on the social contract and the natural law, he tended towards what might be called a more Hobbesian, as opposed to an Aristotelian, view of society and the state. He generally agrees that liberty—positive, civil liberty, not simply the freedom to do whatever one wishes—is only possible within the law, the social contract, guaranteed in turn by a sovereign power. This should, certainly, be a power acting in accordance with reason and Enlightenment values—he further defines civil liberty as “the condition wherein

⁸⁴ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 32.

⁸⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 20.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, 60.

the citizen obeys only the law, and indeed a law...based on justice”—but he takes it for granted that the power should be absolute.⁸⁷ This is clearly seen throughout Gentz’s writings. He believed very strongly in the concept of sovereignty and, it is fair to say, had a personal attraction to power—he attempted periodically in the 1790s to curry favor with Friedrich Wilhelm II and III and thereby climb the bureaucratic ladder, and later made efforts to reach the Austrian inner circle and be given the title of *Hofrat* (Court Councillor, or Imperial Councillor). None of this is to suggest, as some have, that Gentz’s principles were based on gaining power; he sincerely believed in the ideas he disseminated. But as the son of a Prussian civil servant and a product of the Late Enlightenment, he had a well-nigh unshakeable conviction that the centralized absolutist state, shorn of its pre-modern foundations and justified by reason and practical considerations, was the self-evidently superior form of government.

As might be expected, then, Gentz combated the revolutionary ideology chiefly on rationalist grounds. “He who wants to counter the united power of so many impetuous tendencies,” he stated in the introduction to his translation of Burke, “has nothing on his side but cold reason. By this must he judge his words if he wants to show the discontented citizenry that not all the misery of life is lifted when one overturns a constitution, that the welfare of nations is not exclusively tied to one form of government, that the path to happiness in public relations, even more than in private life, is not achieved by blood, misdeeds, and destruction.”⁸⁸ On the one hand, this is a telling blow against the demands of the Jacobins, casting them as intemperate and irrational; indeed, Gentz was perhaps the first to strenuously claim that reason, as such, was a weapon for the Old Regime, more so than for its enemies. On the other hand, it did raise some troubling questions about his own system (not that he could have foreseen them all at the time).

⁸⁷ Gentz, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 10.

⁸⁸ Gentz, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, xvi-xvii.

If the only guide was what reason taught, might there not be a set of circumstances in which the continued existence of the aristocracy, the society of orders, all those things Gentz had begun to defend, did not prove rational? After all, his statement that “the welfare of nations is not exclusively tied to one form of government” was not necessarily a vindication of eighteenth-century society. It might well be that the revolutionary regime could stabilize and begin to provide for its citizens much like any other government--an idea which never ceased to haunt Gentz, if his later correspondence is any indication.⁸⁹ What reason taught largely depended on what the true ends of society and politics were, and he never did give much of an answer to this.

Perhaps for this reason, he was also never wholly (or even largely) condemnatory of the goals the revolutionaries pursued. To the extent that the Jacobins seemed intent on establishing a permanent dictatorship based on demagoguery and the abrogation of all rights, not to mention continued mass executions and the arbitrary seizure of property— all this Gentz certainly did oppose. Their stated goals of securing liberty and justice, however, he did not directly attack, only saying that they were going about them the wrong way. And he appeared to share with them a vision of the modern state: one in which the overlapping jurisdictions, feudal rights, and corporate interests of the Middle Ages were swept away. In one revealing statement, during his critique of the speeches of Robespierre and St. Just, Gentz asks rhetorically, “What is the state, other than the embodiment of individual persons?” When reflecting on his 1791 rebuttal to Justus Möser, it seems clear that while the two men now shared an opposition to the French Revolution, they remained miles apart ideologically: Gentz was looking toward the future, Möser still faced the past with all its hierarchy and corporatism.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 32, 52.

⁹⁰ “Ueber die Grundprinzipien der jetzigen französischen Verfassung nach Robespierre’s und St. Just’s Darstellung derselben,” in Gentz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 134. This statement of Gentz is not easy to reconcile with his statements elsewhere that civil society or the “social life” should be one of the first considerations of

From this mental orientation, Gentz never really swayed for the rest of his life. He certainly associated with plenty of men who did look with favor on the more Christian, romantic, *altständisches* era gone by, and he sometimes wished it had a political reality; but he always parted way when it came to embracing the basic principles of such a vision. Gentz's complicated position on the ideological spectrum will be dealt with in more detail in the conclusion, but for now, suffice to say that while his was a conservative ideology, it only encompassed one branch of conservatism, a branch that owed far more to the Enlightenment and a rationalist view of state and society than did others. Students of German political history have variously referred to this as "reform conservatism," "rational conservatism," or "governmental conservatism."⁹¹ All can be justly applied to Gentz.

Whatever the motives which led Gentz to take up the conservative position, he was, by 1793, an open opponent of the French Revolution. In that year, he published the two-volume work that announced his entry on the anti-revolutionary side of the literary contest. The first volume contained the actual translation of *Reflections*, heavily annotated and with a long introduction; the second contained no fewer than five political treatises he himself had penned, along with a catalog of English publications supporting or contradicting Burke. This last states in the title that it was compiled from what was available in mid-1792, and Gentz appears to have

any constitution, and that chaos is the only result when it is ignored. It also shows the complexity of his political position at this point. If it is true that what may be called liberalism in the style of Kant, Humboldt, et al. is highly individualistic whereas conservatism is above all paternalistic (at least in this setting), then perhaps Gentz should still be classed as a liberal even in the mid-1790s. See Beiser, *Enlightenment*, 17-19.

Despite his opposition to Möser on many points, Gentz does seem to have absorbed, directly or indirectly, elements of the older man's philosophy: his appreciation for the diversity of human existence, his emphasis on the dynamic and unpredictable nature of historical development, and above all his eschewing of the abstract, reductionist metaphysics of the Enlightenment. Had Möser not died in 1794, just as Gentz was beginning his career, it is entirely likely the two would have had some kind of literary relationship. See also Epstein, *Genesis of German Conservatism*, 297-338.

⁹¹ Epstein, *Genesis of German Conservatism*, 9-10, 17-18.

written the introduction near the end of that year, so it would seem he had formed his conclusions about Burke by summer 1792 at the latest and then was confirmed by what he found in other English books, and possibly (as mentioned) events taking place in France at that time.⁹² In a December letter to Friedrich Wilhelm II, informing him of the translation's imminent publication, asking permission to attach the king's name to it, and also hinting at the hope of monetary reward for his patriotic labors, he explained that he had written the book in order "to work against the deception by which the French sophistry seeks to disturb the peace of the entire human race."⁹³

Gentz's disillusionment with and growing hostility to the Revolution closely mirrors that of other Western observers, both in and out of Germany. By no means did all or even most lose faith: Immanuel Kant, likely one of the "metaphysicians" Burke had had in mind, remained optimistic practically to his dying day, for example. Under pressure, he felt compelled to publish his "Theorie-Praxis" essay in 1793, denying that a right of rebellion existed or that he had ever endorsed one; he still insisted on freedom of thought and other Enlightenment ideals, though, and continued for the rest of his life to privately express support for the Revolution.⁹⁴ But many were genuinely horrified by what they saw unfolding. Friedrich Schiller, who had been awarded honorary French citizenship for his play *Die Räuber*, was by the mid-1790s openly condemning the Jacobin regime.⁹⁵ In Denmark, the poet Jens Baggesen, having written *Hymn to Freedom* as a paean to the Revolution, now wrote *To the Furies* in a new spirit of hostility. William Wordsworth, with whose nostalgic lines this chapter began, continues in *The Prelude* with a description of what has killed those fond memories of 1789:

⁹² Gentz, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, 285-88.

⁹³ Gentz to Friedrich Wilhelm II, Dec. 23, 1792. Morrison Collection, British Library, London, Vol. IV, 17-8.

⁹⁴ Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 341-43.

⁹⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *Die Räuber* (London: J. G. Holman, 1799).

But now, become oppressors in their turn/Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence/For one of conquest, losing sight of all/Which they had struggled for: and mounted up/Openly, in the view of earth and heaven/The scale of liberty.⁹⁶

Disillusionment with the Revolution did not take a single form, though, and it produced no single reaction in its former supporters. The evolving counter-revolutionary camp in Europe contained many contradictory positions and arguments, with a variety of competing theories on the proper way to order politics and society. As already indicated, Gentz in the 1790s, though now an enemy of the Revolution, was far from being an arch-conservative in all things. On the contrary, his own system, if it may be called that, reflected classical liberalism and Prussian absolutism as much as Burkean conservatism. This must now be analyzed in greater detail.

⁹⁶ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XI.

Chapter 3

Friedrich Gentz's two-volume translation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* appeared in Berlin in the spring of 1793. It was accompanied by five treatises he himself had written: *Ueber politische Freyheit und das Verhältniß derselben zur Regierung* (On Political Freedom and Its Relationship to Government), *Ueber die Moralität in den Staatsrevolutionen* (On Morality in Political Revolutions), *Ueber die Deklaration der Rechte* (On the Declaration of Rights), *Versuch einer Widerlegung der Apologie des Herrn Mackintosh* (Attempt to Refute Lord Mackintosh's Apology), and *Ueber die National-Erziehung in Frankreich* (On the National Education in France).⁹⁷ More was to follow. In 1794, he published a translation of Jacques Mallet du Pan's *Considérations sur la nature de la Révolution de France* (Considerations on the Nature of the French Revolution), and a lengthy article of his own, *Über die Grundprincipien der jetzigen französischen Verfassung, nach Robespierre's und St. Just's Darstellung derselben* (On the Basic Principles of the New French Constitution, Following Robespierre's and St.-Just's Depiction of It).⁹⁸ Although more translations and essays would appear in the following years, these mark perhaps the most intense burst of writing he ever undertook at any one time. It is also unique, in a way: Gentz would display throughout his life a penchant for abstract speculation, and even after his move to Austria, would occasionally publish contributions to debates on philosophic matters. But from 1800 on, his political activity was dominated first by the struggle against Napoleon, and then by the practical problems facing

⁹⁷ The Burke translation and the five named treatises can be found in the first and second volumes of *Ausgewählte Schriften von Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Wilderich Weick, vol. 1 (Stuttgart & Leipzig: L. F. Rieger & Co., 1836). For purposes of space and relevance, I have here omitted discussion of the fifth and last treatise, on national education.

⁹⁸ Gentz, *Mallet du Pan über die französische Revolution und die Ursachen ihrer Dauer* (Berlin: Friedrich Vieweg, 1794); *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 78-152.

Restoration-era Europe. Rarely after the late 1790s would he find much time for extended treatises on the first principles of human society and government.

That being the case, these writings are instrumental in understanding not only the nature of Gentz's reaction to the French Revolution in its radical phase, but also the core of his thought on essential problems of political theory, such as the relationship between order and liberty and the origins of state and society. Though he was to have a lengthy career spanning several more decades, in which he would make a number of modifications to meet shifting circumstances, his political outlook and proffered solutions to the crises of the Western world were, in their essentials, determined by the same principles that guided him here. His ideological position in 1793 was not quite what it would be in 1800, or 1819, or 1830, but the continuity over this stretch of time is clear nonetheless.

Moreover, it enables us to highlight the similarities and differences between his and others' reactions to that event. The French Revolution's antecedents were complex and even somewhat contradictory; in some ways, it was a culmination of the Enlightenment, in others, it was a rejection of that movement and more akin to early stages of Romanticism. A single, coherent reaction from its opponents was therefore impossible. Some Europeans were so horrified by what the Jacobins had wrought that they desired an escape from burgeoning modernity altogether, back to medieval times, becoming actively hostile to the idea of a government and society based on natural rights and rational principles. Others drew a sharp distinction between the Revolution and the political legacy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and sought to preserve this heritage (including the Enlightenment). Gentz clearly belonged to the latter camp, what can be called "Counter-Enlightenment" rather than "anti-Enlightenment." Though his arguments drew on pre-Enlightenment assumptions as well, he

primarily opposed the Revolution in terms of the values of his generation, and went to great efforts to preserve those values, forming a conservative critique of the unfolding events.

In the introduction to his translation of *Reflections*, Gentz showed that the youthful optimism of the *Aufklärer* had not deserted him. He began with a paean to the possibilities and promise of the enlightened eighteenth century:

Humanity had awoken from a long slumber...In this time of general rejuvenation, every step on the path of the sciences was a decisive victory that sooner or later would reach all social classes. Through the increase of knowledge, the great became gentler and milder, the lowly became more docile and self-reliant...respect for the laws, love for civil order, and trust in the leaders of the state, the most secure underpinnings of the thrones, were reinforced in every mind: and those who attacked tyrants were the benefactors of princes.⁹⁹

But now everything had changed. A new spirit had arisen from the very abundance of learning, one which “urges forth in all countries of Europe the restless, unpleasant, innovative mood, which manifests itself everywhere where the spiritual culture appears lacking in true energy.” To the people of France, it seemed, no political activity was worthwhile if it did not end in the overthrow and trial of a monarch or a general bloodletting. They were in love with revolution for its own sake, he moaned; they thought nothing of creating and repealing constitutions, “as one puts on and takes off a garment,” and now the nation “forgets its teachers like its benefactors, does not respect its own icons, and tramples its favorites underfoot.” The execution or imprisonment of France’s leading citizens, men of science and politics, meant nothing to them, but was shrugged off and soon forgotten.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Ausgewählte Schriften von Friedrich von Gentz*, 1, 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Beyond a certain point, of course, Gentz had to let Burke speak for himself, without additional commentary of his own. He was not committed in these first pages to laying out a thorough political program of his own, but he did set forth several principles separating the revolutionary from the anti-revolutionary. They were as follows:

-The apostle of the new has contemporary events on his side; the defender of the old must rely on reason.

-The revolutionary, praising freedom as the highest good, strives for individual power, his opponent for a limitation of that power.

-The revolutionary looks forward to a future good, and revolts against a present evil; the anti-revolutionary warns against a future evil and safeguards a present good.

-The revolutionary has faith in the masses; the anti-revolutionary finds reason to distrust all hearts wherever he goes.

-The proponent of revolution has, all other things being equal, the advantage in the presentation of ideas: he can boldly take flight, while his opponent is bound on all sides.

This list, along with the rest of Gentz's introduction and translation, shows that he had fully reversed his position of two or three years before; albeit in accordance with the Enlightenment values he continued to adhere to. Now it was the revolutionary who was an enemy of reason, shallow, unthinking, and blind, while the traditionalists ("conservative" was not yet in use as a political description) were reflective, rational, and visionary.¹⁰¹

Of significance as well is the party to which Gentz attaches the primary blame for the unrest. Though agitators in the National Assembly come in for their fair share of criticism, he attributes this damaging revolutionary foment to the entire class of *Schriftstellern*, professional

¹⁰¹ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, i-xl.

writers and intellectuals, who have gotten it into their heads that they, and they alone, are qualified to be the political masters of France:

Legions of magazines, newspapers, and brochures are flung into the workshops, the public places of assembly, students' halls, and the salons of the great. Whoever can manage a pen believes himself neglected, if he is not also given charge of at least a city....Everyday modesty closes the mouths of the laity when the experts speak upon jurisprudence, medicine, or metaphysics: but as soon as the talk is of political constitutions, everyone is an adept.¹⁰²

On the surface, it seems a little odd that a man who was trying to use his own pen to increase his income and his influence should levy this particular attack; but the specifics of the charge are revealing. Gentz is clearly speaking of politics as a science of sorts, similar to “jurisprudence, medicine, or metaphysics,” which should be placed in the hands of experts, or at most, those able to understand it—a category naturally including himself. He, after all, was not advocating sudden, radical change or leaping before one looked. That was the failing of his fellow writers, who in their impudence presumed to be authorities on issues with which they had no experience. Political activity was not for Grub Street scribblers, any more than the illiterate rabble below them; it was for men of broad mind and mature worldliness.¹⁰³

The intemperance of the *Schriftstellern* and the subsequent violence of the Revolution were, to him, clearly linked. With Schiller's history of the Thirty Years War clearly in mind, Gentz railed against the fanatical and missionary intolerance of the revolutionaries in Paris, echoing Burke in his comparison of their courts and proceedings to Inquisition tribunals. Their goal, he predicted, was to extinguish all opposition, not only France but around the world. And in

¹⁰² *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, 3-4.

¹⁰³ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*. For a broader view of the European public sphere in the eighteenth century, see also James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

the process he composed a passage that deserves to be quoted in full, looking forward to a day when the revolutionary spirit would be combined with a totalizing despotism:

Everything which previously had worth in the eyes of man shall be treated as trinkets, everything whereby millions found happiness will be uprooted as whimsy and depravity. Henceforth all shall be one nation, one people, one faith, and one tongue {italics added}. Rather than slowly and laboriously assembling systems of government through wisdom and experience, “Liberty and Equality” shall take the scepter of the world in their hands, and the earthly tyrannies with all their old allies, with religion, sciences, and arts, if they are not clad in entirely new garments, will wander into the night of eternal oblivion.¹⁰⁴

It would be going too far to say that Gentz accurately predicted the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, but he did have a clear sense of the underlying danger—that the power required to carry through a revolution, whatever its merits, could easily lead to a despotism, one based not on personal aggrandizement or glory but on cold impersonal metaphysics, and thus become very dangerous to any individual or institution in the minority.

The thoughts Gentz expressed in his introduction and annotations were more fully developed in his subsequent essays, in which he dealt not only with the political issues of the day in their abstract form but with their concrete application to the situation in France. Looking at the order in which these essays appeared, it would seem that Gentz considered it his first order of business to meet the revolutionary principles head-on and evaluate them on their own terms. What are the ideas of the French Revolution based on? Are they moral ideas? Are they the product of sound reasoning, and what are their consequences? Secondly, he would treat the Revolution as a historical event, tracing it from its initial conception to the present day, and hopefully drawing a moral from that evolution.

¹⁰⁴ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, xv-xvi.

The first of these treatises, *On Political Freedom*, was devoted to how far an ideal like “freedom” or “liberty” can be realized in the workaday world. All human societies, Gentz suggested, are characterized by a struggle between two ends: freedom and government. By “government,” he meant the necessity for the sovereign to create and enforce laws for his subjects and essentially to protect them from one another. Some of what he had to say about freedom was muddled by his frequent distinction between “natural” and “political” freedom, but most of the time Gentz used the former definition: freedom in the sense of one being able to do what one wished and pursue one’s self-interest. This was desirable enough, but incompatible with the development of civil society, which required individuals to give up some of their freedom for the collective benefits mutual association provided. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Gentz was doubtful whether a true state of nature, with the actual enjoyment of natural rights, had ever historically existed, but to him that was a moot point. Once persons began combining to form a society, political freedom, the freedom to enjoy the benefits created by society and by the government which sprang from it, was the only kind of freedom that mattered. He was very clear about this, not only here but in his subsequent treatise on the Declaration of Rights: “That the human being, in entering into company with equals, gives up part of its original rights only in order to enjoy the remainder in safety and to have the total of its manifold aims advanced, -- upon that everybody agrees.” Never was there any question in his mind that political or civil freedom was far superior to its natural counterpart, precisely because the latter was restrained. “Freedom allows blind nature to run its course,” Gentz wrote, “but the masterpiece of human wisdom is to create a good government.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 9. As referenced in Chapter 1 (see above), one can see here the influence not only of Kant and the legal experts Gentz had studied in his youth, but—rather ironically—Rousseau, who had made similar arguments about the relationship between freedom and government in his *Social Contract*.

Freedom and government were highly desirable in and of themselves, and the best arrangement would be one in which the maximum amount of each existed; yet of course this was rarely possible. That being the case, which should be given preference? Gentz reasoned that it was better for an excess of governmental power to exist, rather than an excess of freedom. “The faults of a government are the faults of its handiwork; they are more or less capable of improvement, without needing to dismantle the whole.” An excess of freedom, on the other hand, would in short order burst through the constraints of all society and government, tear down all semblance of order, and lead to pure anarchy. “A blind man can depose a king in a few minutes,” he warned, “and in an hour condemn all the thrones of Europe to destruction.”¹⁰⁶ Placed alongside his warnings about the potential for a totalitarian regime, it is clear that Gentz saw an implicit, even inescapable, chain of political devolution. Unchecked democracy led to anarchy, and then to tyranny—a view that ranged him alongside not only Burke but also the enlightened reformers in Europe’s absolutist regimes, as well as much of the Federalist Party in the new United States.

The arguments Gentz lays out in his essays go off in many directions, but what ties them together more than anything else is the idea of *Verfassung*, a constitution. Now when Gentz used the word, he was thinking not of a specific written document, such as had recently been ratified in the new United States, for example, but rather of what might also be termed *Grundgesetz*—the whole body of foundational law for a given state. This law might consist of written edicts and decrees, of course, but it would also include any number of unwritten legal precedents and even basic customs, often of no known origin. It was similar to the mosaic of legislation and statute

¹⁰⁶ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 11-13.

that had long governed the Holy Roman Empire, of course, and Gentz was inspired in part by the way that imperial structure had balanced different component states and social orders.

It could only follow that such a constitution, depending as it did on intangibles and contingencies, would vary wildly from place to place, and even from one historical era to the next. Accordingly, Gentz reasoned that the relative degree of liberty and government an individual might enjoy must also vary by time and place. His admiration for the British constitution was as great as most Germans of his generation—the reconciliation of freedom with government had been more fully achieved in Britain, he felt, than anywhere else in Europe—but he did not believe it was suited to any given country, presumably including his own. Conversely, while he thought the Turkish constitution as bad as any in existence, that did not stop millions of people from living under Turkish rule “in prosperity, even abundance.” The key question was how politically mature a people was, how able they were to exercise freedom in a rational and mutually beneficial manner. “It would be senseless to hope that the slaves of the Grand Sultan could in a moment become a people with British enlightenment and British freethinking,” Gentz wrote, “as it would be absurd and foolhardy to turn the Turkish constitution into a British one.”¹⁰⁷

On the surface, statements like these are hard to square with the Enlightenment values he was claiming to defend, seeming as they did to reject the idea of natural equality regardless of nation or race. At the same time, Gentz did not rule out the possibility that the Turks (and others) would, someday, be ready for a political system on the British model. The “point of maturity” represented by the peoples of Western Europe was, he implied, one towards which all human societies were evolving, however slowly. But the natural pace of individual and societal

¹⁰⁷ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 18-21.

development could not be rushed. It was the task of the true statesman to gauge this pace and enact piecemeal legislation that would gradually increase the degree of general education and political maturity, which in turn would lead to more political freedom.

What of the role of political revolution, then? Were there any circumstances in which rebellion against and overthrow of the existing powers were justifiable? This question was the subject of Gentz's following treatise, *Über die Moralität in den Staatsrevolutionen*. Although he did not universally rule out the possibility of such a revolution being justified, the circumstances he put forth in which it would be legitimate were so narrow as to make it practically impossible. He reiterated his belief that a constitution should not be static; changes, even profound changes, were acceptable and even at times desirable. Had not Edmund Burke heaped praise on England's Glorious Revolution a century before? But it could not be changed at the drop of a hat, which was, after all, the essence of a revolution.¹⁰⁸

From what, or whom, did a revolution derive its authority? Supporters of the one then underway in France would answer, "the people," i.e. the majority; as would revolutionaries and their friends in future generations. Gentz rejected this justification, and his reasons for doing so, as well as the conclusions to which they led him, were peculiar. It should go without saying, of course, that he considered the majority to be of suspect quality in any circumstances. Several years afterward, in another review of the Revolution's history, he accused the French people of having cast off their "old peaceful good nature" for "a restless longing for destructive novelty" which itself was one of the chief engines behind that event.¹⁰⁹ From a more legalistic position, though, he denied that the majority possessed any inherent authority; the proposition "what the majority decides is law" was merely a convenient provision without any logical necessity to it. It

¹⁰⁸ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 34.

¹⁰⁹ *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 78.

was useful and even necessary in making many decisions, to be sure, but it possessed no moral force all its own, unless everyone had individually consented to be bound by the decisions of the majority beforehand. Furthermore, Gentz, as mentioned in Chapter 2, made it clear that he viewed the state as a collection of individuals presided over by a sovereign power, rather than a patchwork of corporate bodies (as Möser and some other traditionally-minded Germans would contend). Therefore, assuming the social contract which gave rise to the state to have been an actual contract, it must have been one consented to by each particular individual—that is, a contract binding each individual to the others and to the state. Such a contract—the constitution, in political terms—could be departed from by individuals as they so chose, if their intention was to also depart from the state, “but no contract on earth can include the outrageous clause that it should be an available part for the contrary society to set aside the entire association without the assent of the others, and to arbitrarily design on its ruins plans for a new one.” This turned the whole theory of the social contract, or at least Rousseau’s version of it, against itself, by delegitimizing the whole concept of the general will.¹¹⁰

Having concluded that there was nothing sacred about majority rule, Gentz proceeded to emancipate the minority from it, by the following argument:

In any deliberation, be it a single and isolated meeting, be it a wholly united people, for the majority decision to be binding for all, it must unanimously settle upon the will of the majority a force it did not have in and of itself. Without this preliminary, the resolution of ten thousand individuals will be as little binding on the will of an individual as the decision of two. Only he who has given his consent that the will of the majority should be law owes obedience to the law it produces.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 43-9, 56.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 39-40.

This is a decidedly severe qualification of the legitimacy of democratic government, and one which brought Gentz considerable criticism from later scholars. I will revisit what he meant by this later, but here it should be noted that this was an excellent example of the sort of argument he usually advanced: Enlightenment concepts (the autonomous individual, with a right to give or withhold consent) applied for conservative purposes (denying the moral basis of political revolutions).

But even leaving aside questions of legitimacy, such a revolution as that in France was, Gentz argued, almost bound to slide into immoral violence and tyranny. For a revolution which tore up the existing social contract for a new one—even (or especially) a revolution aimed at imposing equality—was bound to alienate major sections of the population. Too many rights and privileges from the old days would have to be eliminated, too many people would have to be dispossessed—especially in a nation like France, with a powerful and wealthy nobility. The revolutionaries could not hope to reconcile so many disaffected persons through reason or compromise; the only way of making what they had done stick was the use of force. This they had indeed resorted to, and the results were apparent:

Oaths were heaped upon oaths, whereby any man who wanted to save his meager livelihood, often merely to save his very life, had to declare himself a loyal subject of a law, wherein the oppressed could not possibly find satisfaction, and an honest vassal of a nation that treated him as a prisoner-of-war....What the state had been promised, one viewed as that frail commitment which the fear of imminent death wrings from the unarmed traveler under the knife of the murderer.¹¹²

And this is without mentioning more famous events such as the September Massacres or the execution of the king and queen. Gentz was following the spirit in which Burke had written, but now, adding his own contributions at a time when the Revolution was reaching its most

¹¹² *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 55.

violent phase, he was able to seamlessly integrate his treatise with the warnings in *Reflections*, creating a strong cause-and-effect argument.

Having dealt with liberty, the right of revolution, and state constitutions in the abstract, Gentz next turned his attention to the particulars of the current case. Unlike some, he did not casually dismiss the French Declaration of Rights; the opening sentence in his treatise upon it labeled it as “one of the most important documents in the history of this century,” if not the world. Not only was it to be the foundation for the constitution of a powerful nation, it had captured the imaginations of people throughout Europe. So much Gentz realized. Nor did he view its assumptions and expressions as universally pernicious. “That man, when he comes into the world,” he continued, “brings with him rights, of which nothing but his own free will can strip him...no one today who has even fleetingly thought about mankind doubts.”¹¹³

But to base the constitution of a country—any country, let alone one as large and complex as France—on such benign commonplaces was patently impossible. It would take an army of philosophers decades to determine how such rights might be applied and enforced in the varying and imperfect condition of man, and even that would leave out the question of how government should be properly organized. Moreover, such a declaration as this not only made no provision for how a just government, once established, might preserve and perpetuate itself, it might actually make that task harder, since any regime whose legitimacy was measured by this abstract benchmark was bound to become unstable sooner or later. By providing so many pretexts for a faction or even an individual to declare the government unconstitutional, there would be a threat of rebellion and civil war at every turn. Better that there be no constitution at all, Gentz argued, rather than one such as this: “A legislator who only remains true to the voice

¹¹³ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 63.

of his own conscience, will...not easily become an unjust legislator,” but a state dependent on the Declaration of Rights alone would not be safe from any kind of tyranny.¹¹⁴

Likewise, Gentz’s verdict on the specific content of the Declaration was decidedly, though not universally, negative. Some of its articles, such as the Fifth (restraining the scope of state action) and the Eighth (barring cruel, unusual, and extralegal punishment) he considered fairly benign in and of themselves, and portions of others, he added, expressed laudatory principles—the statement that natural rights, consisting of the freedom to act as one pleases without infringing on the freedom of others, be upheld as far as possible (Article Four), for instance. But for the most part, the ideas and intentions set forth in the document were either nonsensical or outright falsehoods or both; and in all cases dangerous.

Consider his reaction to one of the clauses in Article One—“Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” The only possible way the claim to equal rights could be taken seriously, Gentz replied, was if the writers meant to say that a given right was just as much a right as another given right—an elaborate way of saying $A = A$, and surely that particular revelation did not need to be proclaimed to anybody. In any other respect, the claim was contradicted by reality at every turn. Men did not only not remain equal in rights, they were born unequal in rights. Could a child born to aristocrats be considered equal in rights to one born to paupers? One born to urban merchants equal to one born to rural laborers? Obviously not—their individual circumstances varied so wildly that they could not possibly stand upon equal footing. The assertion would be insulting, if it weren’t so risible. (It is interesting that, whether he knew it or not, Gentz anticipated here the mantra of nineteenth-century radicals: assurances of formal equality were pointless alongside continued social inequality.) “One cannot grasp,” Gentz

¹¹⁴ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 68.

concluded, how such a statement as this “could gain reputation and credit in an assembly of intelligent men, and in one of the most enlightened countries of the world.”¹¹⁵

Most of the rest of the Declaration was dealt with in similar manner. Above all else, he attacked its articles for being abstract, vaguely worded, open-ended statements which could not under any circumstances provide a template for concrete problems of government. This was true even of assertions he viewed somewhat positively. The right to property, listed alongside liberty, security, and resistance to oppression as fundamental human rights in Article Two—of which Gentz, as a middle-class civil servant from a well-off family, might be expected to approve—was sharply criticized for being merely listed without any explanation whatsoever. It was like saying one had a right to liberty and to resist oppression—none of this is exactly wrong, but what does it mean? Unless such statements are defined and explained with care, with limitations attached (as is the case with every other right), and inserted into a well-crafted constitution, they are so much idle chatter.¹¹⁶ The former student of Kantian metaphysics and reader of Rousseau was now speaking with both feet firmly planted (some might say bogged) in the ground.

The next treatise, the reply to Sir James Mackintosh, who would later turn against the Revolution as well but was at this time still its partisan, was among Gentz’s most strenuous attempts to refute the revolutionary position on a historical, point-by-point basis. Mackintosh (1765-1832), a Scottish lawyer and polymath and a prominent Whig politician, was still a supporter of the Revolution, and in 1791 had published *A Defence of the French Revolution and its English Admirers* as a response to Burke. In this book, whose rebuttal of his fellow Whig many considered more persuasive than that of Paine, Mackintosh had upheld the ideas in the

¹¹⁵ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 85-8.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 89-92.

Declaration of the Rights of Man, and insisted that the events in France were a case of legitimate resistance to a tyrannical ruler.¹¹⁷

Gentz categorically rejected this interpretation. While France was certainly in dire need of reforms, highlighted by various abuses of the existing political and economic structure, this in itself did not mean that the kingdom had an arbitrary and tyrannical government. On the contrary, said reforms and their practicalities were being debated at the highest levels.¹¹⁸ As for the idea that the reigning King was himself a tyrant, this was a bad joke. The actions of the Court in the period 1787-89 had made it all too clear that Louis XVI was in fact more than willing to make concessions to the Third Estate, even to the point of trampling upon his own rights as sovereign. What had happened in the summer of 1789, moreover, with the proclamation of the National Assembly and the storming of the Bastille, was not legitimate in that there was no sanction for it in the ancient laws of the kingdom. Power had slipped from the absolute monarchy, descending not upon the sober bourgeoisie of the Third Estate but on the Parisian mob. This continued a theme from the earlier treatises, and would recur in future publications—having broken the original terms of the social contract, the French Revolution had debased itself from the start and descended from one level of evil to the next, culminating in bloodshed and terror.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ *Vindicae Gallicae: A Defence of the French Revolution and its English admirers against the accusations of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, including some strictures on the late production of Mons de Calonne, 1791.* Mackintosh never became a thorough conservative in the way Gentz did, but he did in time abandon his early support of the Revolution, through the influence of Burke and events on the Continent. During an 1802 visit to Paris, during which he was applauded by the locals for his Defence, Mackintosh reportedly answered, "Messieurs, vous m'avez si bien refute." Patrick O'Leary, *Sir James Mackintosh: The Whig Cicero* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), 23.

¹¹⁸ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 116-21. Gentz does not go into great detail in *Versuch* about the specific problems he saw plaguing France under Louis XVI, but in articles in his *Historisches Journal* a few years later, he pointed to the inefficient taxation system and what he saw as the neglected agricultural interest. In addition, he felt that the French population was too large for its resources to sustain it.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 123-130.

Summing up, it seems clear from these many treatises that however much he might be borrowing from Burke, as well as Möser, a number of points were definitely original to Gentz himself. One was his repeated examination of a country's constitution, which could mean a paper document or the aggregate political structures in existence. When passing judgment on their relative strength or weakness, what mattered to him was their practicality—how far they conformed to the realities of human nature, the efficacy of their workings, the extent to which they preserved existing balances of power, etc. Related to this was his ability to analyze and expound upon the details of how events had unfolded.

Shortly after the publication of *Reflections* and the attached treatises, Gentz demonstrated his penchant for practice over theory yet again, as he turned his attention to the growing gulf with his old teacher, Immanuel Kant. As mentioned earlier, Kant was among the few German intellectuals of his generation who never turned against the Revolution, remaining so consistently supportive of it that he eventually began to dissociate with longtime colleagues who had begun to criticize it. In September 1793, Kant published an essay in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, entitled “Ueber den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis.” More commonly known as the “Theorie-Praxis” essay, Kant used it to argue that because the true measure of morality is whether our actions conform to the ethical principles established abstractly, practice ought to conform to theory rather than the other way around. Furthermore, since the Revolution lived up to this philosophy of ethical rationalism, it was a good and defensible thing.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Immanuel Kant, “Ueber den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of the Sciences (Berlin, 1902), VIII, 273-314.

As Gentz had devoted much of his critique of the Revolution to this notion that because X is true in theory, it must be in practice as well, it was natural for him to respond, and he did so in the December issue.¹²¹ He did not fully contradict Kant's philosophy, to the point of saying that theory and practice were opposites of each other; on the contrary, he agreed that pure reason could be a guide to moral action, and so also could at times be a valuable tool for statecraft and social arrangements. Where Gentz objected to Kant was the latter's suggestion that nothing except reason was necessary for such endeavors; that is, that practical politics could be solely based on an abstract theory of rights and the social contract. This was clearly not true. The administration of a state was a complex matter that cannot simply be deduced a priori; if all rulers and bureaucrats were philosophers, they would still need a mountain of practical information to develop an effective and just constitution, and no system of metaphysics could provide that. Hence, theory was useful in practice, but only if filtered through experience.¹²²

This difference of opinion appeared not to have any effect on the relationship between Kant and Gentz, or rather the lack thereof; the two were not in active communication after the latter's editing work in 1790-1. Besides, others were taking up the cudgels in the *Monatsschrift* by that point, and Kant was becoming less active in these philosophical battles during the 1790s, due partly to old age and partly to the increasingly hostile climate of official Prussia. He could see clearly that for now, the day belonged to the counter-revolutionary camp in which his erstwhile pupil stood.¹²³

¹²¹ Friedrich Gentz, "Nachtrag zu dem Rasonnement des Herrn Professor Kant über das Verhältnis zwischen Theorie und Praxis," *Berlinische Monatschrift* 22 (1793), 518-554.

¹²² Beiser, *Enlightenment and Romanticism*, 325-6.

¹²³ Even so, Kant never gave up his enthusiasm for the Revolution. One former student wrote in 1794, "He is still a total democrat, and lately he has expressed the opinion that all the horrors now happening in France are insignificant compared to the chronic evil of despotism that formerly prevailed there, and that the Jacobins are probably right in all that they are doing." It was also said that Kant, when at official functions, would go out of his way to avoid those known to be anti-revolutionary in sentiment. Even in 1797, when

If his initial forays tended to deal with the abstract matters of liberty and revolution, Gentz's publications in 1794 were far more interested in the historical and political realities of the situation in France, continuing the tone of his rebuttal of Mackintosh. The first of these, *On the Basic Principles of the New French Constitution*, published that April, was devoted to refuting speeches made by Robespierre and Louis-Antoine St.-Just a few months previously in the Constituent Assembly (referenced in Chapter 2). It was his greatest attempt at a direct rebuttal of the Jacobin leaders, and while there is nothing to suggest any of them were ever aware of his remarks or even his existence, he nonetheless posed some embarrassing questions. In response to Robespierre's comments that the Constituent Assembly shall be governed by virtue alone, Gentz, after observing that this body now possesses unchecked and absolute power, inquires, "But how, if virtue ever passes from this single ruling assembly (a scenario even Robespierre must declare to be possible and, as he constantly speaks of self-sacrifice, even probable)...How shall the people, who even now love virtue by their very nature, save themselves from traitors? Answer: Through the exercise of their own sovereignty, through insurrection." And if the new Assembly likewise lacked virtue, then "Insurrection once more, and insurrection for so long, and so often, until at last virtue triumphs. Truly, a shining prospect for those who love peace as much as virtue!" This sort of biting humor was not often employed by Gentz, but he could be deadly with it when he so chose.¹²⁴

But the sarcasm should not distract from his broader point, that the Revolution, far from being a laughing matter, had created a regime unprecedented in human history for its despotic

penning his *Streit der Fakultäten*, he contended that the outpourings of sympathy for the Revolution were evidence that mankind has a moral soul, thus proving that progress in history is possible. If Gentz was aware of this, as he must have been given his situation, and given that he by now knew much more of the details of the Revolution than Kant did, he could only have felt confirmed in the path he had taken. See Manfred Kuehn, *Kant*, 342, 365.

¹²⁴ Gentz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 98-105.

nature. Past governments had, he acknowledged, at times assumed breathtaking power over their subjects, but these were exceptions justified by extraordinary circumstances. “It was left to the French tyrants to proclaim as law,” as a permanent system, “all that which can shatter civil society, make the lives of private men uncertain and miserable, overturn the peace and happiness of families, and turn a flourishing state into a vale of tears.”¹²⁵

The second was another translation, this time of Jacques Mallet du Pan’s essay *Considérations sur la nature de la Révolution de France* (Considerations on the Nature of the French Revolution). Though less well-known than his translation of Burke, it was a work of at least equal importance to Gentz personally. Born in Geneva in 1749, Mallet du Pan’s life mirrored the young Prussian’s in some important ways. Friendly with Voltaire, and the man behind a publication that landed his co-editor in the Bastille, he was very much a part of the French Enlightenment, just as Gentz belonged to its German counterpart. Mallet du Pan, however, seems to have opposed the Revolution from the very start. He quickly became a Royalist pamphleteer, furthermore going on missions to Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands to enlist support for the Crown.

Although Gentz, in his earlier phase of sympathy for the Revolution, had written of his dislike for the opinions of the French writer, whose periodical *Mercure de France* he had begun reading in 1790, there was much to draw them together. Paul Reiff, who wrote one of the first English-language analyses of Gentz, believed he had more in common with Mallet du Pan than with Burke: “Both rejected the principle of popular sovereignty and fought for a stronger government; on the other hand, they were indifferent as to the particular form of the latter....These parallels could even be followed into the personal characters of the two men, for

¹²⁵ *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 113.

each was possessed of a marked preference for order and moderation in every thing, of a strong feeling of independence and a pronounced antipathy against all that was loud and violent.”¹²⁶

In translating *Considérations* into German, therefore, Gentz was dealing with a kindred spirit, and was highly impressed by what he saw as Mallet du Pan’s insight and sagacity. While not an extreme counter-revolutionary—he bluntly stated, in fact, that the émigrés had done much to stoke the fires of Jacobin extremism—the *Mercure* editor diagnosed the Revolution as an all-consuming force, based upon a faction that wished to completely subvert the social order, and which would, regardless of its causes or its initial merits, destroy everything in its path. It was Mallet du Pan who famously predicted that the Revolution would, like Saturn, devour its own children, a prediction being played out in real time as Gentz began his translation.¹²⁷

There was some scant correspondence between the two—not much more than Gentz’s minimal contact with Burke—but the Frenchman left a strong impression on him. Eulogizing Mallet in an 1800 article, Gentz described his “sane appreciation of the real value of political methods and systems, the firmness and certainty of judgment which distinguished in an instant truth from illusion, and measures which were practicable from those which were chimerical.” Those were standards he himself would constantly strive to match.¹²⁸

Most of what Gentz had to say in the introduction to his translation of *Considérations* did not differ from his previous evaluations of the Revolution—the French people’s mistake was to believe abstract principles could be easily applied to the practical problems of a great nation, anarchy and tyranny had been simultaneously loosed upon France with the destruction of the

¹²⁶ Paul Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 65.

¹²⁷ Mallet du Pan, *Considérations sur la nature de la révolution de France* (London: 1793), 63.

¹²⁸ Sir Bernard Mallet, *Mallet du Pan and the French Revolution*, 343. Written by his great-grandson (the Mallet family, relocating to Britain in the late 1790s, became important civil servants and historians during the nineteenth century), this is one of the very few (and most extensive) treatments of Mallet du Pan, though its accessibility for the layman is limited as much of the material it excerpts remains in the original French.

monarchy, management of the Revolution had fallen into the hands of the most fanatical and wicked of persons, etc. One aspect of his work, however, is worth noting here. More and more, Gentz was turning to the events of the Revolution's later phases to make his argument, seeing in them the logical conclusion of the intellectual corruption that had been present from the start. Thus, the "blindness of the cause of liberty" can be sought "in the wastelands of the Vendee, among the ruins of Lyon, and upon the Place de la Revolution in Paris." Again, juxtaposing past and present excesses, one could not condemn the atrocities of Louis XI's reign or the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, "if one endorses the bloody reign of Robespierre or the murders of September 2 [1792]." ¹²⁹

These works reveal that Gentz was increasingly interested in the recent history of France and other Western nations, using their past to prove his case for the present. In the next few years, he would write extensively not only on contemporary France but also on England, Scotland, Spain, and the United States, among others. Though not exactly an impartial commentator, his research and conclusions again demonstrated a wide range of interests and a talent for quickly absorbing material and just as quickly producing long treatises from it. Consistently, too, he would use these histories and political analyses to argue for the importance of tradition, precedent, and adherence to law.

One example worth mentioning here, both interesting in itself and relevant as an example of his reasoning, was his interpretation of the American Revolution. Though the new United States was not usually at the center of his focus, he did look favorably upon its bid for independence, as did most educated Germans of his generation. In a 1795 article for the *Neue Deutsche Monatschrift*, he described the American republic as a sort of Eden or clean slate for

¹²⁹ Friedrich Gentz, *Mallet du Pan*, 5-8.

humanity, “a state which is the solace of all the unhappy and persecuted in Europe, the hope of the haggard friend of humanity, perhaps someday the nursery school of wisdom and strength for our aging continent.”¹³⁰ In 1800, he considered the situation of the United States more thoroughly in a treatise entitled *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution*. No less a personage than John Quincy Adams, then U.S. minister to Prussia, translated this into English and had it published in America, partly for political reasons but partly to demonstrate the rightness of the American cause from a European, legalistic view.¹³¹ Gentz was not particularly interested in the universal principles proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence—indeed, he considered the talk of “inalienable rights” to be one of the few negative aspects of the Revolutionary War—but believed that, considered from a constitutional standpoint alone, the position of the men who wrote and defended it was unassailable. The Patriot battle-cry “No taxation without representation” was in fact the crux of the matter for him, for the colonial governments, not being creations of Parliament, were therefore not answerable to Parliament, whose demands—taking this to its logical conclusion—were unlawful and ought to be resisted, just as much as if the Americans were resisting an invasion by “the States-General of Holland, or the council of the Indies in Madrid.” To the extent that King George III was allying himself with the efforts of this

¹³⁰ “Ueber den Einfluss der Entdeckung von Amerika auf den Wohlstand und die Cultur des menschlichen Geschlechts,” in Gentz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 171.

¹³¹ As both Adams and Gentz were in Berlin at the time, it is entirely possible that the two were acquainted, and that the latter may have drawn much of his understanding of the American political background from the former. Gentz’s explanation of the legal relationship between the colonies and the British Crown ignores, as many have pointed out, the evolution of the concepts of “King-in-Parliament” and “virtual representation” following the Glorious Revolution. This oversight is odd given Gentz’s extensive knowledge of British history, but it does correspond to the arguments made by Patriot spokesmen during the 1760s and 1770s. Gentz makes no mention in his diary of meeting Adams, but Adams’ surviving diary entries from the late 1790s are far more extensive, and may shed some light on the matter. (See Paul Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 343.) Of course, as a member of a prominent Federalist family, Adams would have had strong personal reasons to have published a treatise disowning any connection between the American and French Revolutions.

de facto foreign power, resistance to him was justified as well.¹³² This situation stood in stark contrast to that in France in 1789, where the king had long been acknowledged as lawful sovereign over all parts of the realm, so that no such possibility of resistance or rebellion existed, provided he acted in a constitutional manner—and Gentz maintained that he had. If anything, Louis XVI had been too mild and conciliatory with the radical party, rather than the tyrant; a line Gentz had continued from his treatises in 1793-4. By any measure, then, the American example was a lawful case of rebellion, whereas its French counterpart was not. It was another instance of Gentz following the arguments of the now-deceased Burke, and it further demonstrated the legalistic reasoning and reliance on history that went into his political theory.¹³³

It would take many more chapters to fully analyze the ideas Gentz laid down in these treatises of the 1790s, but several things are apparent. First, he had not completely abandoned his “enlightened” positions of a few years previously. He still believed in the desirability of political reform, and, in keeping with the common belief in a universal human nature, maintained that all societies were progressing along the same track. Second, he had, however, completely rejected the notion of *revolution* as a means of furthering this end, opting instead for *evolution*. (America,

¹³² Friedrich Gentz, *Origin and Principles of the American Revolution*, trans. John Quincy Adams (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickens, 1800), 33-34, 38. Gentz, who was far more interested in and better informed about events in the Americas than most of his European contemporaries, knew well enough that this was not all there was to it, that the United States did have a strong expansionist and idealistic streak, and that this was likely to be magnified with time. In an 1818 letter he wrote, “The progressive extension of the territory of the United States is in my opinion the greatest political fact of our time; here lies concealed the seed for events that will entirely change the face of the world not in a hundred, but in twenty years.” By this time, being constantly on the lookout for threats to the status quo, he had become somewhat cooler in his attitude toward this new power. Commenting in 1824 on the Monroe Doctrine, which he described as “unparalleled impudence,” Gentz referred to America as a “transatlantic colossus” with the potential for destabilization. Even so, he realized European statesmen in the future would have to work with and not against the New World, and suggested qualified acceptance of the Doctrine. (*Schriften von Gentz*, V, 102.) Regardless of his feelings about the United States per se, however, his defense of its War of Independence and the grounds on which he based that defense show a preoccupation with legal contract and an implicit view that revolution can only be justly undertaken by organized polities, not by individuals.

¹³³ Gentz, *Origin and Principles of the American Revolution*, 49-51.

the one exception, he did not properly consider a revolution to begin with, but rather a lawful countermeasure to abuse of centralized power.)¹³⁴ Third, in the process of rejecting the right of revolution, he also discarded many ideas that for our generation are foundational elements of Western liberal democracy.

An obvious example of this is Gentz's statement on the illegitimacy of majority rule. His argument can be read in two different ways. The first is that state sovereignty only applies to those who agree with the decisions of the authorities. Some scholars have argued that Gentz is inadvertently hoist on his own petard here. If an individual is not bound by any resolution he has not given his consent to, then implicitly, the Old Regime governments Gentz wishes to defend are no more legitimate than the revolutionary regimes he attacks. Neither kind, after all, ever operated by unanimous consent, and both were willing to use force to obtain the compliance of the minority.¹³⁵ That being the case, why would Gentz open himself up to such an obvious counterattack?

The second way to interpret this passage—which perhaps answers the question—is that Gentz was making a very specific point about a government that purports to rest on popular support. Early modern regimes were never completely independent of the public sphere; as much as their ruling classes liked to claim a divine right to govern, they always required not only obedience but some degree of cooperation and active support from the populace. Nonetheless, that was manifestly not how they publicly justified their position. Whether wrapped in the imagery of God's favor and selection or couched in more secular terms of providing order and “good government,” the general assumption, up through the eighteenth century, was that the affairs of state were things the common man neither could nor should be privy to. There were

¹³⁴ Gentz, *Origin and Principles of the American Revolution*, 53-55; *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 49-52.

¹³⁵ Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 322-3.

those who were meant to rule, and those who were meant to be ruled; hence, the question of whether one ought to obey laws in whose making one had had no hand simply did not, under most circumstances exist. It did exist, however, if the government not just practically but formally derived its legitimacy from some kind of popular consent. Seen from this angle, it would seem that in making this argument, Gentz actually meant to hoist the revolutionaries on their petard, rather than suffer such a fate himself, once more by showing them to be working against the values of the Enlightenment.¹³⁶ It was the proponents of majority rule, he was suggesting, who were undermining their own cause, for in making so much of popular consent, they had created an unsolvable problem for themselves, one the Old Regime states lacked because they simply did not operate under the same preconceptions.

This is not to say that Gentz's argument was flawless, of course. As he himself admitted, the principle of majority rule was hardly a new one; it might not have much of a history on the level of an entire state, but within smaller spheres, formal and informal, it not only worked fairly well but was often necessary for any group to function properly. More importantly, the distinction he drew between revolutionary and traditional governments was visibly becoming less true during his lifetime. The notion that a government ought, in a legal sense, to depend somewhat on the will of the "people" was growing in strength throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and under every sort of regime, whether an aristocratic city-state or an absolutist monarchy. Most of these did, after all, claim to legislate on the basis of what tended toward the people's happiness. And the more support this idea gained, the harder it would be for the old ruling elite to claim that their legitimacy had nothing to do with said popular will.

¹³⁶ Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 323.

To have such a narrow and restrictive view of democratic legitimacy, though, was not a radical departure for someone of Gentz's background. The political philosophy he espoused in the 1790s was a reflection of the Enlightenment values of his youth and the Prussian political system of which he was a part, just as much as of his reaction to the French Revolution. Without doubt, his dismissal of the eulogies for the Revolution as shallow and unreflective would not have been possible for him in 1789 or 1790. By 1794 he had accumulated enough information on events in France to assemble a comprehensive argument on why he believed it had erred so badly. For quite some time while still in the employ of the Prussian government, Gentz intended to write a comprehensive history of the French Revolution; he never got around to this, but he had made copious notes and probably understood the mechanics of it as well as anyone in Europe, as his reply to Sir James Mackintosh demonstrates. One suspects that had he lived a generation or so later, Gentz would have been among the first professional historians of note, and in fact Heinrich von Sybel's history of the Revolution was largely based on his material.¹³⁷

It is also clear that, while Gentz was far from being Burke's disciple on all matters, his position was profoundly influenced by what he had read in *Reflections*. This was true not only at the time he began writing—his reply to Mackintosh is considered especially Burkean in tone—but much later in life. In an 1809 treatise upon the justification for the state's existence, Gentz rejected democracy as well as autocracy as a means of political legitimacy: "The state is neither the property of someone, nor an object of the whims of the people; it is an everlasting community to bind together by indestructible ties the present, the past and the future; and in this sense it is of God."¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Heinrich von Sybel, *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit 1789-1800*, 4 vols (Frankfurt: Rütten, 1882).

¹³⁸ *Aus dem Nachlasse Friedrichs von Gentz* (Vienna: Gerold & Sohn, 1867), I, 288.

Much of what he had earlier believed, nonetheless, he still retained in his latest treatises. His ruminations on the variety of state constitutions, though very Burkean in upholding the value of diversity by place and era, also reflect the belief, common to Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, that all humanity was progressing toward a single point, with some societies merely being further along that path than others.¹³⁹ Even where Gentz writes in defense of traditional institutions, he often makes it clear that he does so not for their own sake, but because it would be irrational and useless to force them down a different path overnight. Here too, then, he is influenced by Enlightenment ideals; in fact, he anticipates some elements of the early historicist school. In a way, then, Gentz continues to be optimistic, albeit in a very different setting. Moreover, he would be the last man to characterize his turning as a rejection of reason and philosophy. His attack on the Revolution, his defense of the Old Regime, is to him the only possible outcome of a clear-headed, logical review of the situation. Enlightenment values and a counter-revolutionary position, so far from being at odds with one another, were directly linked.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Like Kant, Gentz ruminated on the idea of achieving “perpetual peace” under the aegis of a world state. It is not clear, though, if he meant by this an actual world government, or a much looser association of sovereign nations, in an arrangement like that of the League of Nations. Given the phrasing employed by Gentz, and his later career in the Restoration-era “Congresses,” the latter is probably more accurate. See Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 48-9.

¹⁴⁰ Because of this, Gentz, it can be clearly seen, was not a reactionary in the mold of some of the French *emigres*, such as Joseph de Maistre, who was also beginning his career as a literary opponent of the Revolution at this time. De Maistre based the legitimacy of the monarchy and the rest of the established order not upon any reading of contract theory or legal sleight-of-hand, but on unabashed divine right: “The king derives all powers and authority from God alone,” and the chaos of the Revolution was the direct result of Enlightened rationalism and its rejection of Christian orthodoxy. Support for the king should begin and end with religious piety. In this way, De Maistre was probably more responsible than anyone else for the later Restoration being summarized as an “alliance of throne and altar.” Curiously enough, Gentz was virtually unaware of De Maistre’s existence until much later. The two men attended a dinner together in 1803, but Gentz seems to have completely forgotten the event until a review of his diaries in 1826. Though aware of *Considerations*, De Maistre’s chief attack on the Revolution, he apparently did not read it; and did not read *Du Pape*, a defense of papal power, until 1820. Though impressed by the latter book, this came less from any religious fervor of his own than from a desire to give some kind of stability to the European political order. Gentz always valued religion mostly for its social utility. Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 27-28, *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Adam Müller*, 336.

The significance of this approach cannot be understated. During the 1790s, the conservative wing (if we may call it that) in Germany was flying in many directions. The eudemolist faction, for instance, resorted to conspiracy theories about the nature of the Revolution, referring to it as an elaborate Illuminati plot, while also resorting to obscurantism and even mysticism in its defense of the “German constitution.”¹⁴¹ Gentz, though he might agree with the eudemolists on certain points, firmly rejected such arguments. He was never in any doubt as to the popular base of revolutionary activity, even if he deplored it, or the conviction of its proponents that they had reason, history, and natural law on their side. Moreover, he rejected out of hand the starting assumptions of this group, that any movement away from the traditional *Ständestaat* and towards a more secular order was a Satanic plot. Not only did he not believe this himself, he saw it as a failure to connect with the issues at work. In employing the tools of rationalism in service of conservative ends, then, Gentz was proposing to meet the revolutionaries upon their own ground, and to turn their own arguments against them. His comparison of the Jacobins to the Inquisition and other past instances of religious fanaticism was only the most obvious example of this, causing Robespierre and others to appear as the enemies of reason and human progress. This was a deliberate choice, and not without effect. If not for his efforts, anti-revolutionary activity in Germany might well have been dominated by obscurantism, mysticism, and special interests, and quickly become discredited. What Gentz accomplished during the mid-1790s was to create a coherent basis upon which the Revolution could be fought ideologically, a body of argument that was Counter-Enlightenment--a conservative critique based on the Enlightenment--rather than reflexively anti-Enlightenment. This provided a

¹⁴¹ *Eudämonia oder deutsches Volksglück, ein Journal für Freunde von Wahrheit und Recht*, 1 (Leipzig, 1795); see also Gustav Krüger, “Die Eudämonisten: Ein Beitrag zur Publizistik des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 143 (1931), 467-500.

foundation for opposition to the Revolution, within both Germany and the European continent as a whole, as the consequences of that event worked themselves out.

Chapter 4

For all his fulminations against the French Revolution on an ideological plane, Gentz did not at first seem very interested in, or optimistic about, a war by the nations of Europe against the new regime. Conducting a campaign of words against the Revolution was one thing; his stance on one of bullets and sabers, however, was a bit more complex than one might assume. Jacobin France was certainly a potential danger if it began exporting its “metaphysics,” as it had in fact been doing along the western German frontier since 1792, and of course Prussia and Austria had been at war with it since that time. The expansionist tendencies of the republican regime were clear to nearly everyone by now, and if France insisted on war with its neighbors, then war there must be, if only to halt and contain the spread of revolutionary principles. In the introduction to his 1794 translation of Mallet du Pan, however, he attached little significance to the current war, which in any case had not been very successful thus far. He had grave doubts about the means and ends of the European powers opposing France, Prussia included. Few of them truly understood the nature of the Revolution; nor, therefore, why and how to combat it.¹⁴²

Even if an aggressive war by the forces of reaction to destroy the Revolution root and branch was practically possible, moreover, Gentz was far from certain that it would be desirable. As he repeatedly insisted, in his translation of *Reflections* and elsewhere, it had accomplished some good in France, such as economic reform and the elimination of privilege—things which would have come about anyway, in time, and would have been far better accomplished without revolutionary upheaval, but which still ought not to be squelched or reversed, now that they had taken place.¹⁴³ At times, he was not even sure there was that much difference between the

¹⁴² Friedrich Gentz, *Mallet du Pan*, 19; Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 77-79.

¹⁴³ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, x-xii.

Jacobins and the Old Regime powers. The French armies had shown little enough respect for the sovereignty of other states, given their invasion and annexation of the Netherlands and the Rhenish principalities—but then, were not Prussia, Austria, and Russia, even now, doing the same with regards to Poland? The moral deficiencies of these powers were on full display, just as their material and structural failings were in the field. “Either carry on this war with arms, as modern times demand, or abandon it entirely,” Gentz argued, and it seemed he preferred the latter as a prelude to the former. The best course of action would be to keep a watchful eye on France but not pursue an aggressive war, and in time the Revolution would burn itself out.¹⁴⁴

Thus Gentz in the mid-1790s. A decade or so later he had plunged himself into the war raging across the European continent, speculating on what armies could be raised and what their strategic goal should be, how to re-inflate popular militarism, and so on. Obviously, this altered stance was a response to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who would for a long time appear as Gentz’s *bête noire*, and the tremendous changes his wars of conquest brought to the Continent’s political order. As this was occurring, Gentz himself was becoming more noteworthy within the elite circles of German-speaking Europe as an expert on political affairs, to the point where more than one nation would rely on his advice and literary talents. This chapter and the next will examine Gentz’s reaction to the changing international situation of the 1790s and 1800s, as well as the strategy and tactics he evolved in response to the threat of Bonaparte. His open opposition to the Corsican general would not only become a mainstay of his political outlook for the next decade or so, and cement his reputation as one of the best-known conservatives in Germany; it would also fundamentally shape the power structures of nineteenth-century Europe.

¹⁴⁴ Gentz, *Mallet du Pan*, 33.

Reconstructing Gentz's literary reputation in the immediate wake of his publications of 1793-94 is not easy. There is not much evidence that he became a phenomenal success as a writer overnight, with sales figures being hard to come by, but then this is not very surprising, given the limited size of the German public. Since Gentz would carry on a partnership with his publisher, Friedrich Vieweg, for the next several years, his sales were presumably at least adequate.¹⁴⁵ In any case, Gentz was not out for impressive sales figures alone (although in light of his tottering financial situation, the proceeds must have been dear to him). The run of publications had introduced him to the broader German literary community, and he was quickly appreciated as a young man of talent. Favorable reception came his way from such sources as Christoph Martin Wieland, like Gentz an *Aufklärer* who had lost faith in revolutionary politics, and he also reached out to, among others, Friedrich Schiller and Johann Gottfried Herder, the latter of whom would contribute to his journalistic endeavors in the mid- and late 1790s. Through these men, he would soon make the acquaintance of their fellow Weimar denizen, Goethe, already regarded by many as the leading man of letters on the Continent.¹⁴⁶

It was Gentz's good fortune to hit the prime of life at a time when the public sphere was becoming important as never before in Germany. The idea of an active and self-conscious public, separate from those directly involved in the business of government, had been in existence for at least a generation, of course, but it was only in the closing years of the eighteenth century that it became a mighty force in politics, as the literary world increasingly turned its attention from fiction, poetry, and other "safe" topics to civic affairs. This change stemmed from the fact that most of its producers and consumers were middle-class intellectuals, men like Gentz himself, who were just beginning to distinguish themselves as a group from aristocratic and court

¹⁴⁵ Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 148, 228-29.

¹⁴⁶ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 314-17.

interests, and to see themselves, if not as the true voice of the “nation,” then certainly as possessing as legitimate a claim to that title as the nobility, if not more so. This transformation did not begin with the Revolution, but it was accelerated by it. And as rulers gradually became aware of this development, they began seeking ways to control it through censorship but also to channel it in ways that benefited them. Gentz, with his early burst of activity on behalf of the status quo, was instrumental in showing them how this might be done. With the politically active public still relatively small and upper- or middle-class, a few pro-government publications, operated by men of intellect and patriotic spirit (such as himself), could be of great effect in swaying that public toward the forces of order and the status quo.¹⁴⁷

Gentz’s activity in this regard was prolific. In 1795, following his productive partnerships with the printers and editors of Berlin, he established a periodical of his own, the *Neue Deutsche Monatsschrift*, a periodical intended to cover topics of history, politics, and literature. In addition to editing, Gentz contributed articles, as did his friend Humboldt, Johann Gottfried Herder, and a number of lesser lights from the Prussian bureaucracy and literary circles. Many of the articles are highly interesting, revealing as they do the views of German men of letters on such topics as state development and the implications of American democracy, and much of what Gentz personally provided, having to do with monetary policy and managing state debt, suggests he might have been a successful civil servant had he applied himself more thoroughly.¹⁴⁸ Due to problems with the Prussian censor and sluggish sales, the project folded after about a year, but he was undaunted. Around the same time, he began contributing pieces to the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* and the *Jenaische Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, two of the most important literary reviews in Germany.

¹⁴⁷ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 105-112.

¹⁴⁸ *Neue Deutsche Monatsschrift*, Friedrich Gentz ed. Berlin: Friedrich Vieweg, 1795.

Gentz was also at work on longer productions in his spare time. Among his publications in the late 1790s were a history of France under the Valois dynasty, a biography of Mary Stuart, and much else. To this must be added a number of translations of recent English and French publications, including David Hume's *History of England*, Burke's *Justification of His Political Life* in 1796 and a report on the French Republic's finances by Sir Francis D'Ivernois in 1797.¹⁴⁹ In 1795 or 1796, he began to write a comprehensive history of the Revolution itself, and partly through visits to the library of Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar, amassed a large quantity of notes on the subject; but the necessary primary documents were harder to come by in Germany, and though he kept promising acquaintances that he would get back to work on it at once, this was never completed (though as mentioned in Chapter 3, his drafts, already in book form at his death, and extensive notes would contribute to Heinrich von Sybel's later history of the Revolution).¹⁵⁰

All this was much, enabling Gentz to extend his range of contacts throughout German-speaking Europe; but he had his sights set even higher than that. What he especially wanted, as his letter of December 1792 shows, was to gain the ear of the king and his leading ministers. It cannot be forgotten that all throughout this period, Gentz was still a member of the Prussian civil service, officially nothing more than a fairly low-level functionary. Upon first becoming employed by the government, he had worked at the Seehandlung until his transfer to the Brandenburg provincial chamber and then, in 1787, to the Brandenburg department of the General Directory, the Crown's chief bureaucratic organ at that time. It was far from being a dead-end job; Gentz appeared to be at least mildly competent at his work, for he was promoted (partly due to his royal petition) to the rank of *Kriegsrat* in 1793 and his salary increased to 1200

¹⁴⁹ These are mostly contained in Gentz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI-VII.

¹⁵⁰ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 30-1.

Reichsthaler a year, an impressive sum.¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, as suggested in earlier chapters, Gentz was ill-suited for the life of a paper-pusher. He did not like the work; he did not like his superior, Otto Friedrich Voss; he did not like having to spend his time copying and filing away documents when he should (as he thought) be exercising his real talents of combating the ideological forces of the day and shaping public opinion. Not liking it, he failed to fully commit himself to his job, and reports on his performance were critical from the late 1780s onward, a fact which did little to mend his relations with his immediate superiors.¹⁵²

Being the son of a well-respected bureaucrat with undoubted abilities of his own, though, Gentz did have friends in high places, especially Count Karl Hoym, who replaced Voss as his department chief for several years, and with whom Gentz had a much better relationship. For a time, it appeared that he might be able to make a successful career in the Prussian civil service after all. His advocacy of caution toward France, if not outright neutrality, meshed well with the prevailing winds at court, where interest in war had flagged quickly and was replaced with attention on a final settlement of the Polish question. Breaking off hostilities seemed preferable, at least for the foreseeable future. The Peace of Basel, concluded in 1795, removed the kingdom from the anti-French coalition during the next decade, to the chagrin of its erstwhile allies.¹⁵³ The leading ministers made noises every now and then about doing something for the “common cause” but, on balance, hardly swerved from the path of neutrality, as more and more time was devoted to domestic issues. Similarly, though he kept a close eye on events in France, Gentz directed his attention to more general topics, including those at home, as the contents of the *Monatsschrift* and his individual publications showed.

¹⁵¹ By comparison, a day laborer in Prussia at this time could hope to make perhaps 80-100 Reichsthaler a year.

¹⁵² Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 29, 36-7.

¹⁵³ Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (1989), 151-54.

Then, in November 1797, Frederick William II died after eleven rather forgettable years on the throne and was succeeded by his twenty-seven-year-old son, who became King Frederick William III. Although he has not been regarded by history as an exceptionally capable or strong-willed ruler, the young monarch possessed a strong sense of duty, a commitment to moral reform (his father's reign already being condemned for its debauchery), and vague notions of reorganizing and liberalizing Prussia.¹⁵⁴ This made him somewhat popular at first with the middle-class Berliners who made up much of the bureaucracy—especially the younger members who were interested in reform—and so there were many within the General Directory who saw the new Frederick William's accession to the throne as an opportunity. Not only would the kingdom be reshaped according to their own values, there was every reason to think political power would gravitate to their own rank, and away from the military aristocracy that had held such a stranglehold on that power.

Gentz was one such person. There was no doubt in his mind that some kind of political and economic liberalization was desirable, in fact necessary. His penchant for a system based on the British model, his reading of Montesquieu, and his support for the early steps of the French Revolution, have already been mentioned; moreover, he had read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and fully approved of it, translating it into German in 1794 and consistently following its precepts for some time thereafter, championing free trade over mercantilism and later forms of economic protectionism. The idea of establishing in Prussia a constitutional government, accompanied by economic reform, then, seemed highly desirable to him. Moreover, during this time of transition from one reign to the next, there was as usual a great deal of political maneuvering at court. It seemed likely that the new head of the *Kabinett*, the king's executive

¹⁵⁴ For a more thorough treatment of the new king, see Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann, *König in Preußens großer Zeit. Friedrich Wilhelm III., der Melancholiker auf dem Thron* (Berlin: Siedler, 1992).

agency which oversaw the rest of the central government, would be Ludwig Anastasius Mencken (maternal grandfather to Otto von Bismarck). Mencken, drawn from the same middle-class element now rising within the civil service, was, like Gentz, interested in enlightened reform, and in fact he knew the young bureaucrat and saw him as something of a protégé.¹⁵⁵ Given his sudden connection to high-placed members of the government, and his belief in his own wide-ranging perceptions where domestic and foreign policy were concerned, it was possible, then, for Gentz to entertain notions of becoming a “power behind the throne,” and immediately after Frederick William III’s accession to the throne, he availed himself of the opportunity to gain favor with the new sovereign by sending him an address full of suggestions for what policies he should follow. The *Sendschreiben an Friedrich Wilhelm III*, as it was titled, must have been a rather startling address to read, given its tone. Gentz was of course intelligent, and far more knowledgeable on current events than the young king, but to deliver to him fifty pages of what was in essence a lecture was, to put it mildly, a bit unseemly. Not only that, it seemed to clash with the message Gentz had been sticking to the last few years, that subjects should be obedient and dutiful toward their sovereigns, not telling them what to do.

As for the policies Gentz recommended in the *Sendschreiben*, his first suggestion was strict neutrality with regard to the expanding Continental wars, as he had been advocating the last three years. Prussia should maintain a strong military position, certainly, but six years of war with France had accomplished nothing. It was neither rational nor desirable to become involved in a futile struggle once more.¹⁵⁶ On the domestic front, these generally adhered to classical liberal ideology, calling for freedom of occupation and an end to state economic monopolies. In particular, he railed against the government’s monopoly on the tobacco industry, which he

¹⁵⁵ Eugen Guglia, *Friedrich von Gentz* (Vienna, 1901), 147-48; 156-57.

¹⁵⁶ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, V, 7-9.

regarded as particularly inefficient and unjust. Additionally—and somewhat surprisingly—there was a section advocating freedom of the press, something which caused Gentz no end of embarrassment later in life, when he was supporting highly restrictive censorship in the Prussian state. “Of all things that shun shackles,” he declaimed, “nothing can endure them as little as the thinking of man.”¹⁵⁷ Censorship laws would be not only unjust but impractical, since they would only create hostility among the public without having any effect. There was no danger, Gentz promised, that an unrestricted press would undermine the stability of the state, for the medium would in fact regulate itself: “Mere opinion finds no other adversary than the opposite opinion, and, when it is in error, the truth.”

It cannot be assumed that this was a merely incidental recommendation on his part, as he had earlier referred to it as one of the absolute goods to come out of the early stages of the French Revolution. Even so, that Gentz should have not only called for freedom of the press, but blandly promised that falsehood and slander could never gain a foothold within the institution, seems nothing short of ludicrous. It would be one thing if he had simply failed to anticipate the abuses of a free press which would become rife in the nineteenth century (and indeed our own era), but had he not said only five years earlier, in his translation of Burke, that an excess of self-important writers, “scribblers,” had been among the chief causes of the French Revolution?¹⁵⁸ The puzzle only grows if one considers that Gentz really had nothing to gain personally by advocating complete freedom of the press; it was not likely to advance his career, unlike his support of neutrality, and might even do it harm. There may be no explanation any more satisfactory than what Gentz himself offered when, embarrassed after 1815 by accusations of

¹⁵⁷ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, V, 14.

¹⁵⁸ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, 10.

hypocrisy, he said that the *Sendschreiben* had been the work of a very young, very foolish man.¹⁵⁹

As far as Gentz's personal prospects were concerned, the results of the *Sendschreiben* were mixed. Suggesting such sweeping reforms as the total dismantling of mercantilism, with a great many interested parties likely to be upset, was bound to make many in the government uneasy, even if they considered economic liberalization desirable in itself. Moreover, the obviously self-promoting vein in which Gentz presented himself—"It is audacious to advance oneself as the organ of millions, and to speak in the name of all one's fellow citizens to their common father"—could not but be grating to many ears.¹⁶⁰ There were more than a few who thought the young bureaucrat ought to be reprimanded rather than praised for his address. This criticism was far from universal, though. Frederick William himself appears to have been impressed by the essay's arguments, and it was widely reprinted in Prussian newspapers, with generally approving commentary.¹⁶¹ Gentz referred to the reception of the *Sendschreiben* as "one of the most pleasant experiences of my life,"¹⁶² and while he was prone to inflating the impression he had made on others, he would not have spoken so if not satisfied with the reality.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 2, 24.

¹⁶⁰ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, V, 3.

¹⁶¹ Otto Tschirch, *Geschichte der öffentlichen Meinung in Preussen vom Baseler Frieden bis zum Zusammenbruch des Staates*, 2 vols (Weimar: 1934), I, 280-85.

¹⁶² Gentz, *Tagebücher*.

¹⁶³ It is curious that nowhere in the *Sendschreiben* did Gentz address one of the growing controversies of the time: whether or not to abolish serfdom in Prussia. As might be expected, he does stress the need for freedom of occupation and the removal of restrictions on trade, and one might infer from this that he favored a liberalization of the conditions on the *Junker* estates; but the matter of serfdom itself goes unmentioned. That Gentz should have ignored this is puzzling. The likeliest explanation is that as an ambitious young man seeking to advance his career, he was waiting to gauge the opinions of the king and the higher circles of the government before committing himself to paper. Partly, too, he may have been following his old teacher Kant's policy (or what he took to be Kant's policy) that freedom of thought and expression were of greater importance than other political and economic freedoms.

For the moment, in fact, there seemed good reason to think that the address had made Gentz's career. Almost immediately after Frederick William began his reign, he did indeed appoint Mencken *Kabinettssekretär*, empowered to direct all civil affairs of the kingdom, which could not but inflame the hopes of those who stood behind him. Simultaneously, the king established a commission to study and, if possible, abolish the state monopoly on tobacco, and Gentz, who had singled out this monopoly for particular criticism in his essay, found himself one of the new members. For a time, Gentz reveled in the appointment. "Seldom have I had a more tiring job," he wrote in a letter that winter, "but seldom a more enjoyable one."¹⁶⁴ Beyond the good work of the commission itself, he entertained hopes of rising to the very top of the heap. Mencken was in ill health and would likely die or retire in the next few years, and between the impression Gentz had made on the king when it came to domestic reform, and his growing reputation as a staunch anti-revolutionary and expert on foreign affairs, there was a chance he might inherit much of Mencken's position and influence, perhaps even rise to the rank of *Kabinettssekretär* himself. Or so he thought, anyway. It was not impossible, but certainly improbable, given how many heads he would have had to leap over for that to happen.

These ambitions were fleeting, though. Over the winter of 1797-98, the reformist party within the government was steadily frustrated, partly because of pushback from the military high command but also because of rivalries and cliques within that party itself.¹⁶⁵ Mencken, Hoym,

Based on Gentz's other policies during this period, it seems likely that in private at least, he did favor an end to serfdom; however, no documents have come to light in which he discusses the issue at length, or lays down a plan for its accomplishment. See also *Ausgewählte Schriften*, V, 37.

¹⁶⁴ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 233.

¹⁶⁵ While Gentz had not discussed it in his *Sendschreiben*, the question of abolishing serfdom was certainly in the air at the time, and there were concerns from the high command that such a move might damage the kingdom's military capability, as serfs provided the bulk of the army's manpower. This led the ranking officers to oppose the broader reform measures as well. See Robert Berdahl, *Politics of the Prussian Nobility: The Development of a Conservative Ideology, 1770-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 90-97, 105-06.

and Voss all fell out with each other, and after a few months, Mencken's poor health did indeed force him to retire. His replacement as *Kabinettssekretär* was not Gentz but another careerist by the name of Beyme. Gentz, meanwhile, found himself once more under the authority of Voss, who had replaced Hoym as head of the commission for reorganization of the South Prussian administration.¹⁶⁶ Given that Hoym had been a man for whom Gentz had nothing but praise--"He always rewarded my service with kingly magnanimity"--this was a cruel blow, "one of the most fatal that could have befallen me," he complained to Garve.¹⁶⁷

The whole affair was frustrating, not only for his personal ambitions but also for the whole idea of accomplishing something significant from his current position, and it may have been at this time that Gentz began to think seriously about a life beyond the drudgery of the Prussian bureaucracy. Political writing—living by his wits—that was an exciting, if never completely secure, existence, and one which allowed him at least indirect access to the glittering world of kings and courtiers. How could one be spoken of in half the capitals of Europe and then go back to being a cog in the machinery of state? Even before this, he had begun entertaining the notion that he was meant for something greater than a life of humdrum paperwork. As early as 1790-91 he had complained to Garve that his regular employment dulled his mind, and floated the idea of returning to Breslau in hopes of being appointed to the city council there.¹⁶⁸ This idea was never resurrected, but Gentz remained dissatisfied with being a simple bureaucrat. By the spring of 1798, he was actively neglecting his official duties, confessing to Garve that he spent two days of every seven doing nothing but reading and taking notes on the three English, five

¹⁶⁶ South Prussia was a relatively new department. Lying east of Brandenburg and north of Silesia, it encompassed most of the territory gained from the partitions of Poland. Most of it was ceded to Congress (Russian) Poland after the Napoleonic Wars, though some of the western portions would be incorporated into the province of Posen.

¹⁶⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 209.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 188-91.

French, and at least four German papers to which he now subscribed.¹⁶⁹ In a letter to an acquaintance, he confessed:

At the outset of the reign [of Friedrich Wilhelm III] it was in my power to have myself proposed by M[encken] as his assistant, and...I should deceive you if I did not acknowledge that there have been many moments when I felt passionately the attraction which hovers about that prospect, and that there have been other moments when I have been filled with enthusiasm for the idea that it was my *duty* to avail myself of such a position. But reason, cold-blooded reflection, incorruptible knowledge of self, all-powerful fear of selling my freedom for mistaken enjoyment and of exchanging my true mission for a specious one—these won out over ambition for place...I am not made for banging away at cabals endlessly, I have a fear of the military which is not to be subdued, and if the king should put his entire trust in me today, I should certainly go to pieces in less than half a year.¹⁷⁰

Given his previous attempts to curry favor with the new king, either this was false modesty or Gentz's experience of bureaucratic wrangling had soured him on the idea of actually exercising power himself, as opposed to influencing those who did. Likely it was something of both. From his post in Berlin, he was able to see firsthand how the leading ministers, having largely assumed power from the vacillations of Frederick William II and III, promptly broke into rival cliques and attempted to undercut one another. Mencken's departure due to ill health left other ministers, such as Voss and Count Carl von Haugwitz, in competition over domestic policy, neither they nor others, in their disgruntled subordinate's opinion, capable of seeing the true threat lying west of the Rhine.

Interested though Gentz may have been in the internal affairs of the Prussian state apparatus, he continued to devote a great deal of his time to the unfolding of events across Europe, but especially in France. In his *Sendschreiben* he had, despite all his attention to domestic policies, referred to foreign relations as "the essential condition for [a state's] internal

¹⁶⁹ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 206-7.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 243-44.

welfare, and almost without exception the primary source from which its happiness or its ruin are derived.”¹⁷¹ His translation of Burke and his other treatises had been well received, and the young bureaucrat was rather taken with the idea of being able to win public applause with his pen. Accordingly, Gentz waded deeper and deeper into the intellectual battles over the Revolution and its fallout--which was entering a new phase just as the abortive reform project was playing out.

Somewhat ironically, considering the prominence that individual would have in his mind for the next fifteen years, Gentz’s reaction to Napoleon Bonaparte’s sudden rise to power was not, at first, entirely negative. Indeed, being taken up with his historical treatises and with Prussian domestic affairs, he appears not to have even made written reference to the Corsican general until the spring of 1798. It was more or less in line with his (and before that, Burke’s) predictions that the revolutionary chaos would terminate in a strongman arising to impose order, and so far as that went, he could face the change with equanimity. Immediately after the Brumaire coup of 1799, he wrote that “the steps which the organizers of this revolution have taken in the first days of their rule seem to justify the trust which is generally felt for them.”¹⁷² He also seems to have initially believed that the fiasco of Bonaparte’s Egyptian expedition would chasten his tendency toward conquest. That said, Gentz had hardly taken his eye off recent developments in France. While the Directory established in 1794 had initially given him hopes that a more stable government would terminate the Revolution, the Fructidor coup of September 1797 and the elections of early 1798, both of which handed the Directory over to the Jacobin faction, combined with Bonaparte’s successful campaigns in northern Italy and abortive plans for an invasion of England, led Gentz to describe the opening year of 1798 as the most significant

¹⁷¹ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, V, 6.

¹⁷² Friedrich Gentz, *Historisches Journal* (1800), I, 364.

for Europe since the outbreak of the Revolution. And there is no doubt that he did fear Bonaparte's talent, charisma, and sheer ambition from the start. In a letter to Garve in 1798 (the last written before his friend and instructor's death), Gentz referred to the young general as the "blood-dripping creator of the Italian republics," and warned that if the latest French expedition against England were to succeed, "and should a new general Continental war not break out, the Revolution is going to stride forth from the Rhine to the Vistula and from the Po to the Carpathians, before the eighteenth century goes to its end."¹⁷³

In any case, Bonaparte at this time presented only one facet of the French threat to Europe, as far as Gentz was concerned. His 1801 publication, *Über den Ursprung und Charakter des Krieges gegen die französische Revolution* (On the Origin and Character of the War against the French Revolution), presented the Corsican general not as an entirely new phenomenon, or a singular force of nature (Gentz, following Burke, had after all made the prediction that a dictator would eventually come out of the Revolution),¹⁷⁴ but simply as an exceptionally talented military man who had enabled France to take advantage of the mistakes made by the Coalition powers in their prosecution of the war. Until after the Brumaire coup, he expected France to continue lurching from one bout of revolutionary violence to the next, and doubted that Bonaparte had the political skill to master the situation.¹⁷⁵ As yet, his hatred of Bonaparte had not reached the vitriolic levels it would later attain. The war was still, in his mind, a continuation of the original Revolution, and one moreover that appeared winnable. With Russian armies looming on the French doorstep and a powerful royalist element continuing to operate within the country, it seemed very plausible that the Revolution might finally be brought to an end. To Gentz, Prussian

¹⁷³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 251-52.

¹⁷⁴ Gentz, *Mallet du Pan*, 146.

¹⁷⁵ Gentz, *Historisches Journal* (1799), II, 456; *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 255.

cooperation with this effort seemed like a no-brainer. Not only would it hasten the collapse of the French threat, Prussia would also benefit from having been on the winning side. It was his role, he considered, to talk the government into taking action.

Accordingly, with royal support, he founded a second periodical, the *Historisches Journal*, which first appeared in January 1799 and ran until late 1800. Unlike his previous venture, the *Monatsschrift*, this was almost entirely a one-man affair; Gentz not only edited the journal but provided the vast majority of its articles, though there were occasionally a few outside contributions. There were essays on literature, domestic policy, legal precedents, and so on—it was here that his comparison of the American and French Revolutions appeared, for instance—but mostly it was devoted to foreign policy and trying to whip up official support for Prussia’s re-entry into the Coalition. In particular, Gentz was careful to praise the English spirit and the English government’s policies at every turn, in hopes of facilitating a reconciliation between London and Berlin. On one occasion, he wrote that “every thinking person and every heart that wishes the human race well must take an active interest in the British nation...no enlightened European will be able to perceive England’s prosperity without exclaiming with that dying patriot, *Esto perpetua!*”¹⁷⁶

Prussian leaders were not averse to this, so far as it went; Britain had, after all, long-standing ties with the Hohenzollerns going back before the Seven Years’ War. Gentz’s long-term aim, though—to anchor Prussia firmly within the Second Coalition—could hardly be overlooked. The English were all in favor of this project, which would prove rewarding for Gentz later on, but while the Prussian government might have been more supportive if the war against France had continued to go well, Napoleon’s triumphs at Marengo and Hohenlinden encouraged a

¹⁷⁶ Gentz, *Historisches Journal* (1799), III, 381.

neutral stance. As it gradually became clear, during the year 1800, that their goals differed from his, Gentz's superiors cooled and began to obstruct him. A present of 500 Reichsthaler promised to him that fall by Count Schulenberg, for instance, was denied by the king, which in light of his financial condition cannot but have deeply frustrated him.¹⁷⁷

As far as Gentz's reputation was concerned, however, the *Historisches Journal* was a resounding success, for it was this publication, more than anything else, which made his name common among conservative circles in Europe. He was noticed and well-spoken of in the Austrian, British, and Russian governments. In 1801 he noted in his diary with satisfaction the receipt of a diamond-studded watch from Tsar Paul I, following hard on the heels of an enameled snuffbox from the Austrian emperor.¹⁷⁸ Even more flattering, given his lifelong Anglophilic inclinations, was the notice Gentz received from Britain. He had attracted favorable attention from no less than William Pitt as early as 1795 for his translation of D'Ivernois' article on finance in the *Monatsschrift*; this was followed by his 1799 publication in the *Journal* of an article upholding the solvency of the Bank of England (and therefore the entire government), which had been under serious attack by Thomas Paine and others.¹⁷⁹ Gentz's able refutation of their charges was very gratifying in Whitehall, where there was keen awareness of the need for friends on the Continent. Not long afterwards, Gentz recorded in his journal a gift of 500 pounds from the British government, together with the personal thanks of Pitt and Lord Grenville. Eager to continue this relationship, profitable in so many ways, he cultivated the new British envoy to

¹⁷⁷ Gentz to Frölich, (GStA Merseburg Rep. 94 IV N b 2), Oct. 23, 1800.

¹⁷⁸ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 3.

¹⁷⁹ *Neue Deutsche Monatsschrift; Historisches Journal*, III, 378-85.

Berlin--John Proby, 1st Earl of Carysfort, a known backer of Pitt--and by November 1800 he was generally recognized as London's unofficial representative on the Continent.¹⁸⁰

The capstone of this phase of his career, though, was his book *Von dem Politischen Zustande von Europa (On the Political State of Europe)*, published in 1801. A review of the international power system since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the work was quickly translated into English and French and won Gentz high praise from many quarters for his lauding of the balance of powers and, in particular, his emphasis on the need to restrain a single state (i.e. France) from dominating the Continent.

All this activity, enjoyable in its own right, was also very profitable to Gentz in more ways than one. Certainly the financial proceeds from the publication were of importance: they seem to have sold well, by and large (approximately a thousand copies of *Von dem politischen Zustande* were printed, no mean feat in German publishing circa 1800),¹⁸¹ and he received 1500 Taler at the end of 1799 for a year's issues of the *Historisches Journal*—very welcome profits indeed, as the condition of Gentz's finances was already by this point erratic at best. Beyond that, there were the fame and prestige these labors won for him. The compliments and gifts he received came from the highest levels, all over Europe. By 1800, he was on sufficiently genial terms with prominent men like the Marquis Girolamo Lucchesini to merit repeated invitations to the latter's country estate, and enjoyed similar relations with diplomats, foreign correspondents, and literary figures within Germany and beyond. While visiting Weimar in 1801, he attended a dinner that included Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Friedrich Schiller. He apparently left no lasting impression of (or on) Herder, but corresponded occasionally with Goethe thereafter,

¹⁸⁰ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 1. 500 pounds would have equated to over 3000 Reichsthaler, more than double Gentz's official salary at this point.

¹⁸¹ Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 228.

and enjoyed a long and private conversation with Schiller, which he called “sustained” and “profound.”¹⁸² Slowly, Gentz was advancing up the social ladder of European intellectuals, invited to sit with the continent’s leading lights and able to look down, see others below him on that ladder, and become a patron to them in turn.

It was also around this time that Gentz made the acquaintance of one of his closest friends and literary collaborators, and for whom he would later act as a patron of sorts, Adam Müller (1779-1829). Müller, like Gentz the son of a Prussian civil servant, had initially studied theology before turning to literature and philosophy at Göttingen, and from around 1800 up until his death would put his considerable talents to use as advocate for a German Romanticism with conservative and nationalist leanings. The two men first met in the late 1790s, and despite the fifteen-year difference in age, seem to have regarded each other as kindred spirits from the first. It is a fact that Gentz’s letters to Müller were more open and wide-ranging than with anyone else (save perhaps Brinckmann), and at times, the younger man seemed to act as his avatar, drawing him down political and philosophical avenues he might not have explored otherwise.

It was after Müller had returned to Berlin from Göttingen that he made the acquaintance of Gentz, who put it into the young man’s head that he ought to turn his talents to political issues.¹⁸³ This suggestion, and the bond that developed between the two, would decide the rest of Müller’s career. His forays into political thought would first give him a role in the Prussian administration, where he helped inspire opposition to the reforms of the post-Jena era; still later, after both men had relocated to Austria, Gentz would use his influence with Metternich to procure an appointment for his protégé in the government there.

¹⁸² Gentz to Heinrich Froelich, Nov. 13, 1801, G.S.A., Berlin, Rep. 94, IV, N.b.2, Fol. 49.

¹⁸³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 346-49.

The relationship between Gentz and Müller was a productive but a curious one. Both were diehard opponents of revolutionary politics, and later of Napoleon, and both hold well-deserved places in the ranks of German conservatism; yet they also show how great the divergences in those ranks could be. Gentz was, as we have seen, a man of the Enlightenment. He could be highly passionate in his arguments and behavior, but those arguments were governed by logic and the application of scientific principles to problems of government and society. (This is not to say that his arguments were therefore right, simply that they relied more on logos than on pathos.) Müller, on the other hand, was a true Romantic. His approach to the practical problems of his day was grounded in aesthetics, rather than rationality. Indeed, he confessed near the end of his life that the goal of most of his writings had been “the reconciliation of science and art and of their noblest ideas with serious political life.”¹⁸⁴

It was impossible, therefore, for the two men to reach full agreement on political principles. Where Gentz remained attached throughout his life to the Adam Smith school of economics, Müller rejected free trade and laissez-faire economics. Müller called for the revival of a feudal political order, with its division and blurring of political sovereignty; Gentz, remaining focused on the realities of his day, saw such a proposal as at best a distraction. Müller’s idealization of the Middle Ages would lead him, like many German Romantics, to embrace Roman Catholicism; Gentz, a lifelong skeptic, would prove incapable of such a leap. Yet for all their differences, the two recognized each other as kindred spirits, united in their views on the problems in front of them, and they would maintain a close personal relationship to the end of their days.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Adam Müller, *Vermischte Schriften über Staat, Philosophie und Kunst* (Vienna: Camesina, 1812), I, iii.

¹⁸⁵ No full-length biographies exist of Müller, although numerous articles have been written about him. The twentieth-century legal scholar Carl Schmitt had a good summation of Müller’s philosophy and how it compared with that of Gentz in *Political Romanticism* (1922).

Both men, like so many others by now, were increasingly obsessed with the matter of what concrete steps needed to be taken to combat the revolutionary upheavals overtaking Europe. Gentz's practical approach to the problem of countering the Revolution had already been made apparent in his publications. In *Von dem politischen Zustande*, for example, he had argued that since much of the revolutionary regime's success derived from its ability to mobilize the entire population through such methods as the *levee en masse*, rather than resorting to such mainstays of traditional warfare as professional armies. It was only rational for the powers of the Coalition to respond in kind, beginning a propaganda campaign to rally their own populations, enlisting more and more men in the armies, making them truly feel that their monarchs' cause was their own cause--in short, meeting the Republic on its own ground, with its own weapons.¹⁸⁶ This would not be sufficient to defeat France--only united action could do that--but it was a necessary step in that direction. Such advocacy set Gentz apart from many other German conservatives, such as August Rehberg and the *eudaimonia* school, who were instead bent on the total rejection of everything that had happened since 1789. Gentz saw that this was already an impossibility; on the other hand, his proposals raised, almost for the first time, a troubling problem with which the Old Regime powers would repeatedly be faced: how far could one adopt the methods of a revolutionary regime without becoming indistinguishable from said regime? Could the new means be made to serve old ends? This was a thorny question, and for all his talent, Gentz, like so many others, would never find a satisfactory answer to it.

By 1800, Gentz had thoroughly run out of patience with his superiors in the Prussian government. None of them, he judged, had the capacity to grasp the true nature of the European

¹⁸⁶ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 355-73.

situation, especially when it came to the danger of Bonapartist France, and he was tired of the petty office politics in Berlin (though this did not keep him from salaciously repeating their details to others at times). For von Haugwitz, Voss, and the others he had little but scorn; he may not have heard of Abbe Sieyès calling von Haugwitz the “Minister of Inaction,” or “Minister for the Obstruction of Foreign Affairs,” but he certainly would have agreed if he had.¹⁸⁷ Far more irksome, as far as his personal pride was concerned, was the Crown’s decision, with the tide of war turning against the Second Coalition, to discontinue supporting the *Historisches Journal* at the end of 1800. This was a hard blow. His name was known in literary and political circles across Europe by now; he was viewed as a useful ally by King George III and had been honored by the Tsar of Russia; yet his own monarch seemed to view him as just another royal functionary, and not a remarkably valuable one at that. In fairness to the Prussian leaders, who in fact had given him considerable leeway in his activity (he does not appear to have performed any of his official duties for the government after 1799), it was rather embarrassing to have such a vocal anti-French, pro-English propagandist on their payroll, just at the time when the drift of international events was drawing them farther into the growing Franco-Russian alliance. Their main problem was that Paul (whatever gestures he might make to fervent scribblers like Gentz) was by this time looking for a way out of the collapsing Second Coalition, following the defeats his army had suffered in Switzerland, and a reconciliation with Bonaparte. Given the close ties between Berlin and St. Petersburg, and the danger of Prussia being squeezed from two directions, it hardly made sense for the king and his ministers to be seen funding printed provocations.¹⁸⁸ But if Gentz was aware of such considerations—and he almost certainly was—this could only have further weakened his attachment to the Hohenzollern regime.

¹⁸⁷ Golo Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 45.

¹⁸⁸ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 48-50.

His belligerent stance had certainly won him the friendship of a number of prominent Prussians. Among these were Marquis Lucchesini, the newly appointed envoy to France, who had actually met Bonaparte and distrusted him every bit as much as Gentz did, and Prince Louis Ferdinand, nephew of Frederick the Great, a dashing, popular, and militant young man. In these two Gentz found receptive ears; moreover, they afforded him direct access to the world of the high nobility. He could now casually write in his letters and diary of riding out to spend the day at Marquis Lucchesini's, or going to meet Louis Ferdinand and his friends at Berlin's "Stadt Paris" cafe. None of this did much to raise his standing with the government, though, and his association with the prince, who was a bit of a rake, would further undermine his already-tottering reputation with the stolid *burghers* of the capital.¹⁸⁹

Striking out on his own, as it were, Gentz laid out, in the final issues of the *Journal* and in his publications of 1801, his comprehensive vision for restoring peace to Europe. His starting point was an acknowledgement that under the present circumstances, France was in a very powerful position. Having won control of the Netherlands, the left-bank Rhenish territories, and northern Italy, it was not only more difficult to defeat than ever, but stood ready to absolutely dominate German affairs. Such power had been unknown since the days of Louis XIV, and was no more tolerable now than it was then. The British would of course cross sabers with the French at the drop of a hat, and despite its recent attempts at a rapprochement, long-term interests would compel the Russians to do the same. Yet this would be far from sufficient to contain, much less defeat France, without German participation. Prussia controlled northern Germany, Austria the south, and so simple geopolitics made it absolutely necessary for the two to cooperate. Once that

¹⁸⁹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 50-1.

was accomplished, the lesser powers of Europe would have to fall in line; France would be encircled and forced into a more equal footing with its neighbors.¹⁹⁰

Cooperation was the key. Only a joint Anglo-Austrian-Prussian-Russian coalition, with not only active participation but implicit trust between the four, could be expected to carry the day. The powers had thus far been plagued not just by Bonaparte's undeniable military talent but by their own mistrust of each other. Austria and Prussia had designs upon one another; both considered Russia as much of a potential threat as France; and all resented Britain, whose commercial and naval policies had given it a reputation as a maritime predator. While Gentz was a genuine Anglophile, and just as genuinely in need of London's patronage, it is clear in retrospect that his consistent defense of British policy in the press was intended to dispel this resentment on the Continent and clear the path towards a reconciliation. Once this was achieved and Bonaparte brought to heel, Gentz envisioned a revival of the eighteenth-century balance of power, which he considered the best means of maintaining long-term stability; "it was not ideal, but it was capable of orderly improvement and, when operative, provided a satisfactory *modus vivendi*."¹⁹¹ He did not pretend that this would lead mankind toward that goal of "perpetual peace," a concept bandied about so often by Kant and others. His knowledge of the disparity among human societies, socially and politically, had made him too hard-headed to have much faith in such notions. "We should strive seriously, courageously, and untiringly for [everlasting peace]; but so long as we are men, [it] will be unrealizable for us."¹⁹²

This was the plan to which Gentz stuck until the climax of the Napoleonic Wars. It was unquestionably a tall order; the powers he courted would take a long time to agree with him that

¹⁹⁰ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, II, 254-63.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 260.

¹⁹² Gentz, "Über den ewigen Frieden," *Historisches Journal* III (1800), 781.

France was their common enemy, and on many occasions he appeared to be a lone voice in the wilderness. In the end, though, these fractious nations would be brought around, however unwillingly, to Gentz's point of view, and it was precisely the alliance he worked so hard to create that would finally crush the French Empire in 1813-15 and set the tone for post-war Europe.

These were not words the Prussian government was especially interested in hearing at the moment, though. On the contrary, it was drifting into greater hostility toward the anti-French alliance, placing Gentz in an increasingly awkward position. In 1800 he received at least 600 pounds sterling from Lord Grenville for the Bank of England article and other commissions on Britain's behalf, and in February of the following year, he wrote of the amusing coincidence that he had been simultaneously tasked by Lord Carysfort with translating into French an English anti-Prussian memorandum and by von Haugwitz with translating a Prussian anti-English circular into German.¹⁹³ This state of affairs could not keep up indefinitely, and it is not surprising that Gentz became ever more receptive to the offers of assistance from other governments. Switching loyalties to another state was a far more common practice then than now, especially within the patchwork of political entities that comprised Central Europe, and many of Gentz's contacts across the Continent were fellow Germans. Brinckmann, his close friend of the 1790s and 1800s, was the child of Germans who had emigrated to Sweden; Karl August von Hardenberg and Karl vom und zum Stein, the leading Prussian reformers in the years after Gentz's departure, were from Hannover and the Rhineland respectively; and Karl Nesselrode, Russian foreign minister in the 1810s and after, was also of German extraction.

¹⁹³ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 3-4.

Though some Prussian patriots later scorned his move, it was not a particularly controversial action on the broader European scene.

On the other hand, it was also very convenient for Gentz to leave Berlin at that time. His financial position had been increasingly bad since the early 1790s—exactly how much he was in debt by this time is unclear, but he had developed a gambling habit some time back, and it only worsened over time, as his cultivation of Louis Ferdinand and other friends in high places led him back to the tables over and over again. By his own admission, he frequently lost at it, and as a result never had enough cash to pay his expenses.¹⁹⁴ Especially from 1794 onward, and despite his comfortable salary and frequent presents and pecuniary rewards for his literary services, a constant refrain in his correspondence is the request for loans from his friends, from his relatives, from his publishers (first Vieweg, then Heinrich Froelich after a falling-out with the former) from just about anyone who might be willing. This was never enough, though, and by 1802 Gentz was in very serious debt indeed. He paid off (or later said he had) six thousand thalers to some of his creditors, but others never did receive anything.¹⁹⁵ In any case, it was generally known in Berlin society that he was in dire straits where money was concerned.

Added to this, at about the same time, was the total breakdown of Gentz's marriage. He had been married in 1793 to one Wilhelmina Gilly, like himself part of the Berlin Huguenot community. By the standards of the late eighteenth-century middle class, the match was a solid one; Minna Gilly's father and brother were colleagues of Gentz's brother Heinrich, and she herself was, by general agreement, a quiet, demure, conventionally respectable woman—"self-effacing," Gentz biographer Sweet calls her, with "nothing of the *spirituelle* about her."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 5, 18-9.

¹⁹⁵ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 73-4.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 26.

Gentz's correspondence from the mid-1790s shows that he made an initial effort to be a dutiful and loving husband, but he either could not or would not be satisfied by a settled, domestic lifestyle, as the earlier pages have demonstrated. While there is precious little actual evidence of Minna Gentz's thoughts, to have a husband who was constantly taking pleasure trips, flirting with aristocratic women, and gambling away all his money in the course of a single night must have been mortifying--if not on its own terms, then certainly because it was being done so publicly. The two became increasingly estranged, and he was soon having dalliances with a series of young women. Judging from his letters and diary, not all of them were serious, but others crossed the line into physical as well as emotional infidelity. The last of these was carried on with a Berlin actress, one Christel Eigensatz, in the winter of 1801-02, sharing her with her "established lover," a fellow by the name of Zinnow, practically under poor Minna's nose. This led to a domestic row and Gentz's becoming the target of the entire city's gossip.¹⁹⁷

From several perspectives, then, it was much to Gentz's advantage to transfer his attachments, political and otherwise, from Berlin to Vienna. This is not to say, though, that his services were simply for sale to the highest bidder. While Gentz's actions between 1800 and 1802 were certainly partly driven by personal considerations, it is hard not to conclude from what he was saying during this time that the threat of Bonaparte had taken center stage in his mind. The letters to his Swedish friend Brinckmann, for example, are of a rather lackadaisical nature in the 1790s, casually discussing literature, mutual friends, and the planning of trips; by 1801, however, they are suddenly taken up with political issues--the potential for survival of the

¹⁹⁷ How serious an effort Gentz actually made to live the life of a bourgeois family man may be doubted. Even during the period of his engagement, he was still carrying on a liaison with an actress (not Eigensatz) that approached the point of scandal, and led his Swedish diplomat friend Brinckmann, normally rather tolerant in such matters, to write Gentz a letter upbraiding him for his conduct. *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 28.

Holy Roman Empire, the changes of ministers in Austria, what this might mean for Austria's relations with France and with Prussia, etc. If Gentz had been somewhat dismissive of Bonaparte at the beginning, he was now more than making up for it. The First Consul was an existential threat to the peace of Europe, and if Prussia could not be made to understand it, it was time to find someone who would.¹⁹⁸

Besides, it was now clear that he was too much of a thorn in his superiors' side. Up to now, he had never had much of a problem with the censorship board, but the publication of his *Von dem Politischen Zustande von Europa* in 1801 only came after he was compelled to make some revisions of the judgments rendered therein, not so much concerning France (with which the kingdom was still trying to maintain friendly relations) but the 1772 partition of Poland, in which Prussia had taken part. Gentz (who all his life regretted the partition and periodically floated ideas for Polish restoration, though he could never quite see a feasible process for it) had acknowledged the annexation to be beneficial for Prussia, but an injustice all the same, something the censor obviously found offensive. The passages were watered down, but it was a further source of irritation.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, his superiors in the Prussian civil service had become thoroughly exasperated with his lengthy vacations, to the point that upon his request for leave to visit Weimar, Minister Voss told him he might as well submit his resignation; he would be of equal value to the government either way.²⁰⁰

Stymied in Berlin, he began to seriously look to greener pastures. At first it seemed that Weimar, where so many of his correspondents and so many stimulating conversations were to be had, not to mention the duke's wonderful library, would be a congenial home, and his visit there

¹⁹⁸ See for example Gentz's letters of July and September from that year. *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 75-8.

¹⁹⁹ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 49, 74.

²⁰⁰ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 58, 62-3, 73-4.

in the autumn was partly intended to feel out that option. An offer of employment from the duke was not forthcoming, though, and he was forced to look southward to another obvious candidate. At the time of his publication of *Reflections*, he had reached out to the Habsburg emperor, Francis II, writing a short letter in which he described himself as a humble but patriotic German simply doing his part to avert the danger of revolution, and praised Francis as "the guardian angel of Germany," to whom all humanity was looking for leadership.²⁰¹ This flattery was no doubt composed with the hope of some financial reward, as had been the case with his letter to the Prussian king; but it was also true that if Austria had not exactly been an unflinching opponent of the revolutionary regime, its record had been better than that of his native land. Given its pedigree and its strong position in Central Europe, the Austrian state's commitment to "the good cause" was vital, and for both personal and political reasons, Gentz wanted to keep that line of contact open.

Already by 1799, Gentz was increasingly in communication with several officials of the Austrian government, including Franz Thugut, the powerful head of the *Staatskanzlei* during the late eighteenth century.²⁰² He also reached out to a Swiss historian and acquaintance of his, Johannes von Müller, who had some influence with the ministers there. Of more use to him in the end, though, was Count Phillip von Stadion, the current ambassador to Prussia. Stadion had become convinced that Gentz might be very useful to his government as a writer and propagandist, and held out hope of his having a lucrative position in Vienna. Through the good offices of Stadion and others, Gentz was eventually put in communication with the then-chancellor of Austria, Count Ludwig von Cobenzl, who seemed warm to the idea of putting him

²⁰¹ Gentz to Francis II, HHStA, Wien, Staatskanzlei, Interiora, Karton 78, Bl. 1 1793.

²⁰² *Aus der alten Registrar der Staatskanzlei: Briefe politischen Inhalts von und an Friedrich von Gentz aus den Jahren 1799-1827*, ed. Clemens von Klinkowström (Vienna: Wilhelm Graumüller, 1870), 1-3.

on the Habsburg payroll. Cobenzl's reasons and motivations were fairly complex, as will be seen, and Gentz overestimated his devotion to "the good cause," but for the time being, it was gratifying to think that one of the most venerable dynasties in Europe might desire his talents. Despite Gentz's Berlin associates' later remarks that it was degrading for him to abandon his native Prussia for its opposite and rival Austria, the truth was that there were greater incentives for him to leave than to stay, and if forced to choose between the side that ignored his counsel and paid him (in his mind) a pittance, and the side that welcomed his activities and handsomely rewarded him, his decision seems a foregone conclusion. Not only would Austrian service be personally advantageous for him, but it also now appeared that that state was the only Continental empire still committed to resisting the French. Even if Prussia continued to show passivity, a militant Austria meant there was some hope for Germany and the whole situation of Central Europe; with England continuing to fight Bonaparte at sea, he hoped that in Vienna he might hope to further an Austro-British alliance.

Even so, Gentz had not yet made the decision to leave Prussia and the service of the Hohenzollerns once and for all. Only during the autumn of 1801, after another heart-to-heart with his old friend, Wilhelm von Humboldt, he began laying the groundwork for a possible departure, though to the end he was rather duplicitous to others about his real intentions.²⁰³ A letter he received from Minna in February 1802, practically demanding a divorce, cemented things, and from this point, he began tying up his personal loose ends. Even at this late date, he might have managed to patch things up with his superiors and his social circle, but he did not try. Having obtained leave from his post for three months (though not a total separation), he made

²⁰³ Indeed, the very day before he left Berlin for the last time in June 1802, Gentz wrote to his publisher Froelich hinting at his move to Vienna but then casually remarking that he expected to be back in two or three months.

plans for a final departure for the Austrian capital, via Dresden. An explanation sent to Friedrich Wilhelm III several months later, by turns fawning and self-exculpatory, praised the king as a “wise and mild” sovereign than whom Prussia could not have a better, but argued that his stifled career, “my domestic circumstances,” and the general situation made it impossible to remain.²⁰⁴ Elsewhere, in a private letter, he expressed regret for those persons he was leaving behind in Prussia, but felt it was the call, if not of God, then certainly of Destiny: “My hour has struck. My long, long youth has run its course...on the ruins of all my old passions, and inclinations, and indulgences there shall arise an ambition for true fame and a certain hitherto submerged pride over something that lay wrapped about in alien folds far in the depths of my being.”²⁰⁵ However that might be, he was determined to lose no more time. He said goodbye to his family, took leave of his wife, had a last fling with Fräulein Eigensatz, and departed the city on June 20 in the company of Adam Müller. He never returned to Berlin.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Gentz to Friedrich Wilhelm III, GStA PK, Berlin-Dahlem, II, HA Generaldirektorium, Südpreußen, Abt. 1, Nr. 370, Bl. 142-143v 1802.

²⁰⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 100-01.

²⁰⁶ Nor to his wife, from whom he had obtained a divorce before leaving and who died of undisclosed causes later that same year, while Gentz was on his tour of Europe. Gentz expressed deep regret and sorrow on the occasion, later telling Count Stadion the marriage would have succeeded but for their different outlooks and the hostility of her parents, adding, “I never think of this woman that the tears do not choke me.” But Gentz often made passionate statements like that, and whatever sadness he felt for Minna Gentz, there is not much evidence that he regretted the end of the marriage, at least. His treatment of his wife was perhaps the shabbiest episode of his career. Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 24.

Chapter 5

Friedrich Gentz's transfer of allegiance from Prussia to Austria in 1802 occurred at practically the midpoint of his life, and clearly marked a new stage in his career. On the one hand, he had left behind the work of a struggling civil servant, and would henceforth be a publicist and propagandist for affairs of state and foreign relations. On the other, he would be confronted with a new set of concerns. Abstract theorizing about the right of revolution was mostly behind him now; for the next decade or so, the majority of Gentz's time would be spent on the far more practical matter of organizing a coalition against Napoleon Bonaparte, with whom he became practically obsessed. To say that he "organized a coalition" is perhaps an exaggeration; he was never a sovereign or held a high-ranking government post, after all, and could only urge this policy or that on men who might or might not be inclined to listen. But the policies he consistently advocated would serve as the foundation for the later alliance that brought an end to the Napoleonic Wars, and he could take a personal pride in the triumphs at Leipzig and Waterloo.

Gentz had come to Vienna under the strong impression that he was to serve as a soldier of counter-revolution. Nothing, he quickly learned, could be further from the truth. The Austrian government was certainly interested in containing Bonaparte, and in reversing the revolutionary tide if possible; but it was also still thoroughly immersed in the power politics of Old Regime Europe, in which today's enemy could always be tomorrow's ally, and vice versa. At the very time Gentz arrived in the capital—August 1802—his new chief, Foreign Minister Count Ludwig Cobenzl, was negotiating with the French for a new partition of Germany into French and Austrian spheres of influence, and was therefore hardly interested in violent anti-French

publications. Part of his reason for bringing the Berliner aboard in the first place had been to embarrass and undermine Prussia. This was the sort of diplomacy that Gentz, the advocate of committed coalitions, was quickly coming to despise, and it seems clear from his diary entries that while each respected the other's intellectual powers, they did not get along from the start.²⁰⁷

Nor did he get off on the right foot with his new sovereign, Emperor Francis II, who was naturally distrustful of men of letters, especially Protestant men of letters. He had been willing to make use of such a man, a Prussian who vindicated Austrian policy, from abroad; but to have a foreigner and a common scribbler in the government and thus underfoot was something else again. Old Regime powers, and the Habsburgs in particular, had a low opinion of men who lived by their wits, especially if that took the form of writing; they could be useful, certainly, provided they were kept in their place. To sum up their attitude: "The scholars [in the opinion of the Austrian nobility] should only be left to rant and rave at their writing desks. Hunger drives their pens, and here the otherwise dangerous human impulse for expansion produces only thick books."²⁰⁸

Francis might not have allowed his services at all, if not for the lobbying of prominent individuals within the government, including Count Philipp Stadion, envoy to Prussia; Count Klemens von Metternich, ambassador to Saxony, whose acquaintance Gentz had just made; the Emperor's brother, Archduke Karl; and of course Cobenzl himself (who recognized Gentz's potential usefulness, regardless of his personal feelings). In any case, Gentz was formally

²⁰⁷ "He [Cobenzl] treated me with great respect, but also with mistrust and jealousy; and really such men as these could not act otherwise toward me." *Tagebücher*, p. 26.

During the 1820s, Gentz heavily revised his diary entries prior to 1815, destroying the originals and condensing the information therein. Almost certainly he edited many of his earlier expressions concerning Cobenzl, Metternich, and others, for personal and political reasons, so that these sources do not tell us as much about his interactions with these men as we would like.

²⁰⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 37.

accepted into Austrian service shortly afterwards, with a salary of 4,000 florins a year and the title of *Hofrat* (though this was not actually bestowed on him until much later), in return for his committing “all his powers for the best interest of the imperial service,” as Cobenzl’s written instructions put it.²⁰⁹ In practice, “all his powers” meant that, when asked his opinion about the international situation, especially as it pertained to the off-and-on war against Bonaparte, or occasionally on domestic matters (particularly finance, on which he was understood to be something of an expert thanks to his writings on the French *assignat* and the Bank of England’s policies), he should submit to Cobenzl or another relevant government minister an essay containing his thoughts and advice on the subject. Equally, when a policy had been decided on, Gentz might be called upon to defend it in an article or essay meant for public circulation, if he felt he could honestly do so.

It was a definite step up the ladder, compared to the official position he had enjoyed (or rather, not enjoyed) in Berlin. On the other hand, he had already begun to realize that his ability to wield influence, though potentially greater than before, was still very limited. He could only advise, not decide, and as previously mentioned, the foreign policy goals of the Austrians did not necessarily align with his own. Moreover, his status as a commoner was of much greater significance here, in an empire that prided itself on its ancient nobility, than back in Prussia, and it was hard at times not to feel like a social inferior alongside the Habsburgs and the great noble houses they mingled with. This was a new facet of Gentz’s life that would come to the surface on occasion, but for now his irritation had mainly to do with what he saw as Austria’s flawed attitude toward French expansion.

²⁰⁹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*. A *florin* (also known as *gulden*) was the basic unit of currency in Austria until the 1850s and worth considerably more than the Prussian *Taler*. 4,000 florins would have been equal to about 2,800 Taler.

Gentz's animus toward Bonaparte had only grown since the aftermath of the Brumaire coup. At first he had, like many others, been skeptical of the young general yet hoping for the best; speaking in the *Historisches Journal* of Bonaparte's proclaimed wish for an end to the war, he had described these statements as the first instance since the creation of the Republic that "the desire for peace seems not to be a trick of war or a cloak for extortion."²¹⁰ Nor had he said anything deeply hostile towards the man in the following months, and he held out hope that the Peace of Amiens, signed in the spring of 1802 just before his departure from Berlin, would hold. That same year, though, Bonaparte made himself Consul for life, annexed Elba and Piedmont, showed designs of making Switzerland a French satellite, and by the beginning of 1803, he was clearly laying the groundwork for a renewed war with England. His hopes dashed, Gentz drew the logical conclusions earlier than many other observers. To act in such a way marked Bonaparte as hell-bent on the mastery not only of France, but of all Europe; and with such a powerful state at his back, no part of the Continent was safe from his menace.

For far-sighted observers like Gentz to recognize this was one thing; translating it into state action, though, was quite another. The internal politics of the Habsburg realm was a labyrinth, as might be expected of a multiethnic empire with interests in half of Europe; but it may be said that the ruling elite was divided, up to the time of Austerlitz at least, between a "war party," which believed Bonaparte to be an inherent threat to Austria and the peace of Europe in general, and would be satisfied with nothing less than an immediate and general war against him, and a "peace" or "accommodation" faction, which thought that the dictator could be negotiated with and persuaded to play a constructive role in the Old Regime power system. As Emperor

²¹⁰ Gentz, *Historisches Journal*, III (1799), 436-78.

Francis was a weak-willed man at best, it was always a struggle between the two parties to see which would gain his support and thus cut the other out of the government.

Although Cobenzl himself, distrustful of Bonaparte, could not be called an accommodationist, he did believe that Vienna could reason with Paris over such common interests as the fate of Germany. Even if this were not possible, the most prudent course would be to stall for time until Austria had recovered from its earlier wars and could again meet the French on an equal footing. This lack of rigidity made him an enemy of the war party, and once Gentz had grasped this fact, and the broader power struggle in the capital, he began cultivating the friendship of those who wanted Cobenzl out and Austria set on a war footing.²¹¹ Somewhat ironically, these were chiefly non-Austrians like himself: members of the foreign embassies in Vienna, such as Baron Gustavus Armfeldt, the Swedish ambassador, Count Andrey Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador, and another Russian diplomat, the Corsica-born Pozzo di Borgo. Members of the native high nobility—the Esterhazys, the Liechtensteins, the Lichnowskys, and others—he assiduously courted as well, and these introductions would stand him in good stead later in life, but at the time he was mainly frustrated by their inability to see things from his international perspective.²¹² It stood in stark contrast to Britain, whose leaders seemed to have such a superior understanding of the situation--and, not coincidentally, such a higher opinion of himself and his talents.

That Gentz possessed a high degree of Anglophilia during this period has already been alluded to, but it was certainly reinforced in the fall of 1802 when, shortly after officially taking up his new duties in the Austrian capital, he managed to obtain a few months' leave to wind up

²¹¹ August Fournier, *Gentz und Cobenzl: Geschichte der österreichischen Diplomatie in den Jahren 1801- 1805* (Vienna: Wilhelm Graumüller, 1880), 64-66, 120-23.

²¹² Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 43.

his affairs back in Berlin and go traveling. As it happened, he changed his mind before ever reaching Prussia and veered towards the Channel instead. Evidently he felt restless; and with Amiens having produced a short interlude in the incessant wars, there were many like him who wanted to see the sights of a Europe (briefly) at peace. Traveling by way of Saxony and the Rhineland (a journey that will resurface later), he found himself in London by late October. Upon reaching British soil, Gentz could not but be flattered by the very warm reception given to him. His treatises in opposition to the French and in defense of British finances, considered to have done much to maintain that country's reputation on the Continent, had by no means been forgotten. He was invited to the houses of the leading political figures, wrote long letters to the Duchess of Devonshire, observed meetings of Parliament alongside the exiled Duc d'Orleans, Louis-Philippe, with whom he was fast becoming friends, and even had the honor of being received by King George and Queen Charlotte.²¹³ The *Courier* of London reported on his presence, stating, "His reception in London has certainly been more universally favorable than that of perhaps any other private foreigner who ever visited this capital...there is no need of any mysterious cause to explain why Englishmen of all parties should shew their gratitude to the ablest defender of England, nor why the country of Adam Smith should shew her admiration of the greatest political economist of Europe."²¹⁴ The *Morning Chronicle* seconded this assessment: "This civility is nothing more than a grateful return for the service which this author has done to the English nation...To treat such a foreigner with every attention is the duty of the leading men

²¹³ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 395-96. This last appears to have been only a few minutes' conversation, in which the King and Queen (mostly the Queen) asked Gentz his opinions on the political situation in France and Prussia. It was not very substantive, but Gentz found it important (or flattering) enough to recount in a letter to Adam Müller.

²¹⁴ *London Courier*, Dec. 18, 1802.

among us, to prove that we are not insensible to the services of those, who have lent their aid to defend our national character.”²¹⁵

So pleasing was his reception that if Gentz had found an excuse to remain in the congenial environment of Britain permanently, it has been suggested, he would have done so.²¹⁶ No such excuse appeared, though: his good credit in London stemmed from his usefulness on the Continent, and it would have been the height of faithlessness to abandon Austria after practically no service there at all. By the start of 1803, then, Gentz was back in Vienna, but his fondness for Britain lingered a long time, and he could not help but compare his respective treatment in the two capitals. To Brinckmann, he described Austrian high society as “a sorry mess of tasteless sensuality and genteel *misère*,” adding that “the emptiness and tediousness of the great houses is boundless.” Vienna was no better; the food was “terrible” and “tasteless,” the theaters only “very ordinary,” the coffeehouses “abominable,” and the prostitutes “trivial, abysmally stupid, cold, and thoroughly useless.”²¹⁷ These feelings would change, in time, but his remarks show that at the outset, Gentz was not particularly attached to Austria. He had come there because it was expedient to his career and because he judged it would be easier to rally the Habsburgs to “the cause” than the Hohenzollerns. His loyalty to Austria did not extend any further than that, especially after he saw how lowly he was rated by some of its ministers.

Still, he pressed forward. If personal conversations could not persuade the Habsburgs and their subordinates of the seriousness of the French threat, he could perhaps use his pen to do so when an opportunity presented itself. The first such of significance seemed to him to have come in the spring of 1804, when it became clear that Bonaparte, not satisfied with the title of Consul,

²¹⁵ *Morning Journal*, November 1802.

²¹⁶ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 72.

²¹⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 127.

was about to engineer his ascension to royalty as the Emperor Napoleon I. Gentz considered this a blasphemous act, but also an occasion to show Cobenzl and his allies the folly of their conciliatory policy. Accordingly, in early June he dashed off to the minister his *Mémoire sur la nécessité de ne pas reconnaître le titre imperial de Bonaparte*.

If Gentz had not already rejected, root and branch, the principle of popular sovereignty, his latest treatise corrected that neglect. Whatever royal dignities Napoleon Bonaparte might hoist upon himself, he was a product of the expression of that principle; his claim to power was based not on divine right or the so-called “fundamental laws” of the realm, but on his ability to give the people what they wanted and thus win their support. For Austria to recognize the imperial title of such a man, to accept him as an equal of the Emperor in Vienna, was not just a degrading insult to the royal houses of Europe, but an implicit acknowledgement of Revolutionary doctrine itself. This done, “there is no longer anything sacred or stable in human affairs; the thrones of sovereigns, the rights and the privileges of the upper classes, the most revered institutions, the most solid establishments no longer exist, except by the tolerance of their secret and numerous enemies.”²¹⁸

Gentz himself had no expectation that this would have much of an effect on the Austrian government, and he was right; Vienna formally recognized Napoleon as Emperor in August 1804. He did hope that they would sway the other erstwhile enemies of France, and sent copies of the treatise to his contacts in all the important capitals. But the British government, in which

²¹⁸ *Mémoires et lettres inédites du chevalier de Gentz*, ed. Gustav Schlesier (Stuttgart, 1841), 1-28. It is worth noting that Napoleon himself seemed to see his reign in just this light. During negotiations with Metternich in 1813, he famously remarked: “The old monarchs of Europe can lose a hundred battles and still hold securely to their thrones; but if I lose even one, that is the end of me.” Gentz’s objections (and others shared them) to Napoleon’s use of the title “emperor” can be a bit better appreciated when it is remembered that outside of Russia (where the title “Tsar,” though often rendered as “Emperor,” does not have quite the same connotation), only the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, drawing on the papal coronation of Charlemagne a thousand years before, had claimed it. Many of those who quietly acceded to this self-promotion must have been likewise privately outraged by Napoleon’s presumption.

he was prone to put his faith, gave no sign that its policy would be affected, nor were there any encouraging signs from his native Prussia.

Gentz's hatred of Napoleon, more passionate than anything he had expressed since his first blast against the Revolution, was political rather than personal. Personally, he could not help but admire Napoleon's leadership abilities and brilliance as a general, any more than most onlookers of his day could. In later letters, he would describe the emperor as "an incredible man."²¹⁹ The fact remained that Napoleon, though clearly not continuing Jacobin policies in an unchanged form, was to Gentz an heir of the Revolution, and one who was exporting it to the rest of Europe with the sword. Whether he was using the Revolution as a vehicle to create his own personal empire, or was just an instrument of French radicalism, was immaterial; one would be about as bad as the other. To contain the damage done ideologically by the Revolution, and to preserve the old balance of power in Europe, Napoleon would have to be defeated, whatever the cost. So, at least, Gentz read the political map.

Emperor Francis' reaction to Napoleon's elevation was almost as infuriating. In August 1804 he had himself proclaimed Emperor Francis I of Austria (he had previously been only Archduke there), abandoning the title of Holy Roman Emperor Francis II. Though there were few other practical options left at the time, it enraged Gentz that his new sovereign had casually abandoned the heritage of a *Reich* that went back to Charlemagne for a title that was only equal to the French foe--an admission of weakness if there ever was one. "What do you have to say about the unspeakable meanness of the new Austrian Imperial title?" he wrote angrily to his acquaintance Count Metternich, still ambassador to Saxony, that same month. "Austria is a province subordinated to the Empire by feudal ties; one could just as well speak of an Emperor

²¹⁹ August Fournier, *Gentz und Wessenberg: Briefe des Ersten an den Zweiten* (Vienna and Leipzig: Wilhelm Graumüller, 1907), 149.

of Salzburg, of Frankfurt, or of Passau....And to find this nonsensical title grafted upon the most hateful of all usurpations! A counterpart to the Empire of Bonaparte! To justify the most insolent elevation of this murderous theatrical King! Which every decent mind, if it does not wish to sink into despair, must view as a purely temporary phenomenon! What an entanglement of insipidity, wretchedness, and vileness.”²²⁰

The basic problem Gentz faced was a difference in priorities between himself and those he sought to persuade. As a semi-private individual, he had the freedom to go to the heart of an issue and recommend, demand, praise, and condemn depending on whether others were seeing it as clearly as he was and acting upon it. Monarchs like Francis II/I, however, and their ministers like Cobenzl and Metternich, were above all concerned with the preservation of the political realm in their charge. It was rarely if ever possible for men of public responsibility to pursue an ideal with single-minded determination, and as Gentz became more involved in the Austrian government, this was a lesson he himself would have to learn.

However little interest the major powers took in Gentz’s fulminations against the now-emperor of France, they did have an effect (albeit of a personal nature) in one quarter. King Gustavus IV of Sweden read Gentz’s essays and was so taken by them that he had Armfeldt, still envoy to Vienna, award the writer the Cross of the Order of the North-Star, a decoration which, in effect, raised Gentz to the minor nobility. By possessing this dignity, he could now legitimately be styled as “Chevalier Friedrich von Gentz.”

There was, however, a significant hiccup in this honor. Emperor Francis would not let him wear the decoration in public. Probably he did not even want Gentz to accept it, but Cobenzl toned it down a bit in breaking the news. This produced quite a row, as Gentz later wrote in his

²²⁰ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 28-29.

diary, but at last he consented, though he did still have a public ceremony on December 27 in which Armfeldt awarded him with the Cross, with Paget, the Bishop of Nancy, Prince de Ligne, and others in attendance.²²¹ The particular conditions of his elevation have resulted in great ambiguity as to whether or not he merited the “von” in his name; even today, he appears with and without the appellation in different texts. It is certain, though, that Gentz thought of himself as truly ennobled, and used the “von” whenever he got a chance.

Flattering though this dignity might be, of more importance to Gentz was the success or failure of “the cause.” Everything depended on the building of a new coalition to defeat Napoleon and the French imperial project, and he continued to use his pen as best he could to bring that about. To give a thorough account of the course of Continental diplomacy and the short-lived wars in the hectic period 1804-07 would be well beyond the scope of this project, and it has been dealt with at length elsewhere.²²² The following few pages will instead give a condensed overview of Gentz’s own part in this general tumult.

Although burning with a desire to see Napoleon confronted on the field of battle, Gentz was consistently of the opinion that no coalition could be productive without active Prussian involvement. “If the king of Prussia bursts in, Bonaparte is lost,” he stressed in an 1805 letter to Adam Müller.²²³ At the same time, he knew very well from his prior experience in Berlin how difficult obtaining that partnership would be. Though personally sympathetic to the Austro-Russian camp, Friedrich Wilhelm III was determined to maintain neutrality as long as possible,

²²¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 36.

²²² Some of the more relevant general histories here include Geoffrey Bruun, *Europe and the French Imperium* (1938); Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (2008); Jacques Godechot et al., *The Napoleonic Era in Europe* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971); Steven T. Ross, *European Diplomatic History, 1789-1815: France Against Europe* (1969); and Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (1994).

²²³ *Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Gentz und Adam Heinrich Müller* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta Verlag, 1857), 59-60.

an attitude Napoleon recognized and encouraged by periodically offering the chance of Prussian territorial expansion in north Germany. Frustrated, Cobenzl and Metternich in Austria, and Tsar Alexander's envoy Baron Wintzingerode from Russia, resorted to veiled threats about the price Prussia might pay for its noncommittal, but this only made the king dig in his heels more, as Gentz had again predicted.

He himself was of the opinion that Friedrich Wilhelm was a fly who could only be won with honey—specifically, by friendly and peaceable overtures from Vienna and St. Petersburg, and by surrounding him with pro-war advocates. He did what he could in this regard by sending along treatises and letters to the king and his minister Hardenberg, and by getting in touch with his old acquaintance (and fellow hawk) Prince Louis Ferdinand, arranging a correspondence between him and Archduke John that could be communicated to the Hohenzollern monarch.²²⁴ But although the Prussians showed definite signs of moving towards a war footing near the end of 1805, nothing came of it, and Austro-Russian hopes went glimmering.

By then, in any case, it was too late, for a united effort at least. In October General Karl Mack von Leiberich had marched into Bavaria with the main Habsburg army, only to be surrounded at Ulm by Napoleon, who accepted the Austrians' surrender on October 20. Shortly thereafter, the French marched for Bohemia, and on December 1, at the battle of Austerlitz, crushed the Russian army in one of the most brilliant and devastating victories of the entire war. The Third Coalition, like the First and Second before it, was at an end. With Vienna under French occupation, and Emperor Francis having been advised that continuing the fight could cause the whole empire to break up, Austria signed the Treaty of Pressburg (now Bratislava) on December 26, paying an indemnity of forty million francs and being stripped of its territory in

²²⁴ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 101-09.

Italy and southwest Germany. The Habsburg realm survived, but humiliated and much diminished.

Ulm and Austerlitz had been a double blow to all of Gentz's hopes. "Everything is surely over now," he lamented, "for the little that remains can be so easily supplied in imagination that even the pleasure of surprise no longer remains to us."²²⁵ Having no wish to risk the tender mercies of the French, he had left Vienna on November 8, rapidly traveling to Olmütz, his hometown of Breslau, and finally on to Dresden, in neutral Saxony and therefore (for the moment) safe territory. Deeply embittered by the failure of the coalition, he lashed out at anyone and everyone: Emperor Francis was a coward, Cobenzl a "putrescent corpse," Prussia interested only in Prussia, and the British government "ignorant, pertinacious, and incorrigible." Most of all, he loathed those who could not or would not see things as clearly as he himself did: "The rabble here, and this time I mean the higher nobility and the army, are able to see at present only the immediate future, which is a matter of complete indifference to me. May the Devil take us if we do not deserve to live!"²²⁶

All he could take comfort in was the sacking of the discredited Cobenzl after Austerlitz, with Philipp Stadion replacing him as Foreign Minister; and this Gentz did celebrate with spiteful joy. A mere change of personnel, though, was a slim reed upon which to hang one's hopes, and he knew it. Beyond all concerns about diplomatic alliances and military reform, Gentz was becoming increasingly vocal in his opinion that a protracted war against Napoleon could not be won by the rules of the Old Regime. Jena and Auerstadt were still in the nearfuture, but he had seen as early as 1794 that the "total war" tactics of the French revolutionaries, and Napoleon in their wake, had made even the armies of Frederick the Great obsolete. An active

²²⁵ Alan Palmer, *Metternich, Councillor of Europe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 48.

²²⁶ Gustav Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, IV, 159-60; *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 48-9.

public opinion was now at work, and no one could for long ignore its power or refuse to make use of it. As the French population had been mobilized *en masse*, so too must its opponents make a direct appeal for the support of their subjects; yet this was exactly the approach Austria seemed determined not to take. “There is no longer any suggestion of public opinion so far as the great events of the world are concerned,” Gentz fumed in a letter in early 1806; “it has become altogether dormant; three or four cabinets absolutely determine the fate of mankind.” Correcting this oversight was a *sine qua non* for the cause; “unless a great revolution is produced in the thought of the people, all the Macks and Suvorovs that heaven can send us will fail in their undertaking.”²²⁷

In raising this issue, Gentz hit on the fundamental problem facing all the anti-revolutionary, anti-Napoleonic powers of Europe: How far could one adopt the methods of the Revolution without implicitly adopting its assumptions, and ends, as well? Obtuse though they could be, the leaders of the Austrian government seemed to dimly grasp a point which, at this stage at least, eluded Gentz: an active public sphere could hardly be mobilized and then dismissed once it had served its purposes; the crowd would inevitably come to think that the government was now acting in accordance with their own will. Appealing to public opinion would, in a very real sense, transfer political sovereignty from the Emperor and his court to that amorphous abstract, “the people.” It was exactly this which Gentz had railed against in the past, and would again after 1815.

For the immediate future, though, Gentz understood that Austria must seek at least a short period of peace, to recover from the disasters at Ulm and Austerlitz. In August 1806 he penned a defense of the Treaty of Pressburg, stressing its necessity and beneficent qualities—those being

²²⁷ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, I, 180.

chiefly the time it gave Austria to forge a new coalition with Prussia, Britain, and Russia, which could then attack Napoleon's empire from every direction. Though these projects were becoming taxing in their numbers, Gentz had not yet lost hope that *this* time, he would strike upon a plan that would work.

Even as he completed his treatise, though, the pace of events was overtaking him yet again. The brief burst of war fever at the Prussian court the previous year had never really cooled off, and throughout the year, Friedrich Wilhelm III was inundated with claims and warnings of French designs upon the kingdom. By August, after reports circulated that Napoleon planned to strip Prussia of recently-annexed Hanover, the king began lurching—that is the only word for it—towards war. The resulting clash between the two powers had in it the elements of tragedy and of farce, for rarely in history has one of the combatants entered into a struggle with such hope and confidence and been beaten so quickly and thoroughly. Actual hostilities began on October 8; the French inflicted a shattering defeat on the main Prussian army at Jena and Auerstedt on the 14th, entered Berlin in triumph eleven days later, and by mid-November had captured the important strongholds of Pasewalk and Magdeburg. In barely a month, one of the two most significant powers among the German states had been all but obliterated.²²⁸

Gentz had had qualms about the projected war as soon as he heard of it. Initially he wrote pessimistically to Adam Czartoryski, a Polish nobleman he had befriended and who was close to Tsar Alexander, that a campaign against France by either Austria or Prussia undertaken without the other's cooperation would be "inefficacious, useless, and null."²²⁹ Hope died hard, however, and as war loomed nearer, his contacts with the hawkish faction at Berlin instilled in him a new optimism. For once, men like Prince Louis Ferdinand seemed to be calling the shots, and in

²²⁸ Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics*, 302-10.

²²⁹ *Aus dem Nachlasse*, II, 8.

connection with this, at the end of September, Gentz received a request to visit the Prussian general headquarters at Naumburg.

Arriving at headquarters on October 2, and staying until the 12th, Gentz was initially very impressed with the preparations for war and flattered that he had been invited as a witness to the scene. It was a delight to him to again be rubbing elbows with figures like Louis Ferdinand, Stein, and even Queen Louise, with whom he had a private audience and of whom he afterwards wrote: “She expressed herself with precision, with firmness, with energy,” in favor of the “closest possible union of everything that carried the name German.”²³⁰ However, he was very quickly disillusioned. Confidential talks with the generals soon convinced him that the war would certainly end in Prussia’s defeat, and after several interviews with von Haugwitz, it became clear that Gentz had been asked to Naumburg so that he might, in effect, act as a Prussian agent inside the Austrian government, persuading it to join in the latest effort against Napoleon. This Gentz flatly refused to do. It seems rather surprising that he should answer in the negative, given that an Austro-Prussian alliance was what he had been demanding for so long, but his papers suggest that he did not feel Austria was yet ready, materially or psychologically, for another war, and that he had some doubts about the depth of Prussian commitment, even now, to “the cause.” Besides, to be acting once again on Prussia’s behalf would exhaust all his credit at Vienna.²³¹

Whatever the details of these diplomatic maneuverings, the fact was that Gentz quickly lost any hope of Prussian success. Louis Ferdinand’s death in one of the opening engagements, at

²³⁰ Gustav Schlesier, *Mémoires et lettres de Gentz*, 296-300.

²³¹ *Ibid*, 230, 243-51, 314-320.

Saalfeld, further cooled his ardor, and on October 12, Gentz departed headquarters, proceeding first to Dresden, where he learned of the defeat at Jena, then to Toeplitz and finally Prague.²³²

In the wake of Jena, Gentz was understandably very downcast, but he still refused to relinquish the hope that Austria and the other powers could pull themselves together and resume the fight. In March 1807, as the French and Russians battled across the northern plains, he thought there was a chance for the Habsburg armies to strike at Napoleon, writing: “The present moment is decisive. Will Austria let her opportunity slip by without exploiting it at all? If Austria is really determined not to take up the sword immediately for the general cause of Germany and Europe, will she not at least do something *for herself* and *thereby* for the rest [i.e. seize strategic territory in Silesia and elsewhere]?”²³³ In a similar vein, he wrote at about the same time to George Canning, part of the British ministry, repeating that the salvation of Germany and indeed Europe hinged on Habsburg participation. “The direct concurrence of Austria {in the war} is the indispensable condition of salvation...Honor, interest, and duty unite in the most imperious manner to dictate to her the course she ought to take.”²³⁴ Otherwise, Prussia would be left to wither on the vine, and Russia would face the impossible task of defeating Napoleon single-handed.

Austria did not act, however, and shortly thereafter came the news of the Peace of Tilsit, which was yet another crushing blow for Napoleon’s longtime antagonist. It confirmed all his worst fears: the whole of Germany was now either allied with the French conqueror or, as in the case of Prussia, so weakened as to enjoy only nominal sovereignty. “Yes, everything is now

²³² Schlesier, *Mémoires et lettres de Gentz*, 304-07.

²³³ *Mitteilungen des kaiserlichen und königlichen Kriegsarchivs*, 7:95.

²³⁴ West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds. Earl of Harewood’s Archives: Canning Papers, Ref. HAR / GC 50 1807.

over,” he wrote to Baron von Ompteda on hearing the news. “Even the most awful of all the outcomes, which frequently haunted me in my sad reflections during the past four or five years, even that partition of Europe between two colossal powers—which I have long predicted—appears, though sooner than I believed it possible, to be springing out of the ruins of all freedom and welfare.”²³⁵ Once more he tended to blame the various Allied powers for their failures, and his 1807 letters, especially to Britain, are full of complaints about Continental, especially Austrian, “weakness” and “pusillanimity.” If there had been an offer of employment on the table from London, and he could have made his way back across the Channel, probably he would have taken it. Then as ever, though, the British viewed him as more useful where he was as a source of information on Central Europe, and in the Habsburg realm he stayed.

The years immediately after Jena marked something of an exile for Gentz, who spent most of the time journeying back and forth between Prague and Toeplitz. They were not necessarily unhappy years; he later admitted that he had found much enjoyment in Bohemia, consorting with other exiles and emigrants from Austria, Prussia, and elsewhere. If Gentz was downcast, it was surely understandable. *Le petit corporal*, after all the efforts to check or dethrone him, appeared to be the master of Europe, the venerable powers of centuries past now compelled either to throw themselves at his feet or be engulfed by his empire. Among Gentz’s fellow German thinkers, and indeed intellectuals across Europe, it was impossible not to be overawed. All too many now accepted Napoleon as an unstoppable force and even persuaded themselves that he was an engine of progress for Germany, someone who would impose enlightened reform at swordpoint. Gentz himself despised any such shirking of one’s duties in “the good cause.” For him, there could be no such turn of luck, and already, in letters to

²³⁵ Baron von Ompteda, *Nachlass von Ompteda*, I, 306-7.

Czartoryski, he had floated the idea of being hired by the tsar to operate a German-language paper in Riga or St. Petersburg. Nothing came of the suggestion, though Czartoryski himself seemed to think well of it; but for a man who disliked the cold—and the Russians—as much as Gentz did to contemplate such a move was one indication of his low spirits in 1805-7.²³⁶

But it was impossible for Gentz to be very downcast for long. He recovered his spirits that summer at the Bohemian spa town of Toeplitz (now Teplice) near the Saxon border, where a number of like-minded Germans were staying, and which would be (with Prague) his favorite abode for the next few years. “I cannot describe to you how well I have felt since I have been staying in Bohemia,” he wrote to Adam Müller. The honesty of the Austrians, their faithfulness and active sympathy with Prussia’s misfortune without a single exception, their good wishes for the future, their very positive good-will, their hope and confidence—all this has endeared them to me anew....Long live southern Germany!”²³⁷

For all his character flaws, the level of determination Gentz displayed, even after setbacks like Ulm, Austerlitz, and Jena, set him apart from many other men of letters in Germany. In part, this was because he had gone too far out on a limb with his previous writings, for by this point, he was generally viewed as one of the leaders of German opposition to Napoleon. The emperor himself had seen enough of his tracts by now to brand him “that *miserable scribe*,” considered him one of the key ringleaders of continued German resistance alongside Queen Louise and a few others, and was coming down with an increasingly heavy hand on anyone who openly supported the efforts of Gentz and other enemies. In the summer of 1806, shortly before the outbreak of hostilities with Prussia, he had ordered his soldiers in Nuremberg to arrest and execute a local bookseller named Palm, whose merchandise included

²³⁶ Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, IV, 152-67.

²³⁷ *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Müller*, 142-43.

the book *Deutschland in seiner tiefen Erniedrigung* [*Germany in its Deep Humiliation*]. Gentz was wrongly believed to be the author (whose identity remains unknown), and one German diarist inadvertently paid tribute to his reputation when writing of the event: “The French still take us for sheep; would they otherwise have published the record of Palm’s trial? I scarcely find the book in question worth a shot of powder, let alone a bullet. Soon Gentz, Held, and Reichard will be shot in effigy.”²³⁸ In short, through his own efforts and the violent response of the ruler he excoriated, Gentz had become a symbol of opposition to Napoleon.

Symbols of opposition were certainly being sought by those in Germany who wished to keep up the effort against the expanding French empire. Jena, the Peace of Tilsit, and the years afterward were later described by patriotic historians as one of the most desperate, humiliating periods in the history of the German nation, a veritable Golgotha through which Prussia in particular and Germany in general had to pass. In his biography of Gentz, Golo Mann gives a vivid description of the times: “The people...groaned under Napoleon’s closure of the Continent to British trade; groaned, paid, obeyed, and waited. They were hungry; only tallow candles were available for light; and people went afoot, even to the court.”²³⁹ This is of course an exaggeration—certainly some people had it better than others, even among those genuinely suffering; and there were many, among both the elites and the common people, who were openly supportive of Napoleonic rule, especially in some of the south German states and the Rhineland.²⁴⁰ Newly-formed kingdoms like Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg, for example, had clearly benefited from French presence, and would long remain allied to them. That said,

²³⁸ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 133. When Madame de Stael visited Gentz in Bohemia around 1810 and he later came to see her in Dresden, this fact was reported by the French secret police, and Napoleon ordered that she be informed her independent streak had finally gone too far by consorting with that man.

²³⁹ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 154.

²⁴⁰ Katherine Aaslestad, “Paying for War: Experiences of Napoleonic Rule in the Hanseatic Cities,” *Central European History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Dec. 2006), 641-675.

there is no doubt that conditions were truly dire for many. One historian has estimated that in the rump state of Prussia after Friedland, the infant mortality rate doubled, indicative of a genuine human crisis.²⁴¹ Under such circumstances, it was natural for Germans, especially the intellectuals among them, to dwell on the future of their nation.

In this sense, Gentz was a patriot and regarded as such; he claimed Germany as his homeland and sought its welfare. But what did this mean for his relationship with the growing German nationalist movement during the Napoleonic Era? Exactly what his views on German nationalism were is hard to determine. Most of his writings in the 1790s had had to do with matters which were international in nature (the European balance of power, for example, or the nature and origins of the French Revolution) or with the domestic affairs of the Prussian monarchy, not with Germany as a whole. He does seem to have seen the French as “the enemy,” broadly speaking, during this time, and was on occasion capable of expressions that would have warmed the heart of the fieriest nationalist. A letter to Brinckmann in December 1804, for instance, refers to “wanton, terrible, nefarious, blasphemous, despicable, and contemptible France.”²⁴² Only at times, though, does he give indications of thinking in terms of a patriotic German. In 1802, for example, during his excursion to England, Gentz remarked that Germany would be more of a center for the arts if it had “a capital, a central point, if we—without doubt the foremost people of the earth—but had some point in space or time where we could reveal our united strength and our united splendor.”²⁴³ Indeed, it seems to have been this trip, exposing him as it did to an extensive part of German territory under French control, which led to such nationalist feelings as he briefly entertained. These utterances continued to be very sporadic

²⁴¹ Matthew Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism: The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture, 1806- 1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41-3.

²⁴² *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 251.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 375-76.

through the early 1800s, but gradually, as Napoleonic expansion became more concrete in its impact on Central Europe, Gentz began to display a more overt nationalism.

This feeling did not manifest itself in print, though, until 1805, when, at Cobenzl's urging, Gentz wrote and published *Fragmente aus der neuesten Geschichte des politischen Gleichgewichts in Europa*. Intended to arouse the Austrian public and gain its support for the war against Napoleon, the book proved a disappointment in this regard, as the surrender at Ulm had already taken place before it could be published. Nonetheless, he made an impassioned appeal on behalf of Germany's common interests and possible future.²⁴⁴

Whether through special insight or wishful thinking, Gentz positioned Germany as the fulcrum on which the continent turned. "Europe fell because of Germany's weakness... Through Germany's strength Europe must rise again." That strength, he added, could only be of use if the Germans exhibited a greater unity than they had shown in the recent past. "Our fatal internal discord, the frittering away of our glorious powers, the rivalry of our princes and the estrangement of their subjects, the extinction of every genuine feeling for the common interest of the nation, the prostration of the patriotic spirit—these have been the conquerors, these have been the destroyers of our freedom, these have been our deadly enemies and the enemies of Europe." He went so far, even, as to suggest a role in this process for the masses, or at least for the visible public sphere: "should the *political strength* of Germany ever become united, it must be preceded by unity of the *national will*."²⁴⁵

This was the nationalism of a man like Karl vom und zum Stein (with whom Gentz was well acquainted and whom he once referred to as "the first statesman in Germany") in Prussia, already making known his views on the necessity of sweeping away the trappings of feudalism

²⁴⁴ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, IV, 204-59.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 213.

in the German states.²⁴⁶ In fact, after Stein's forced expulsion from Berlin in December 1808, he first went to Prague and spent a great deal of time discussing the "national question" with Gentz. It was not, however, that of the literary Romantics like Arndt or Kleist. In an 1806 letter to Adam Czartoryski, he made it clear that his support for German nationalism, his version of it at any rate, was predicated on his belief that it would strengthen European relations in general. "I am not an Austrian, a Prussian, an Englishman, or a Russian...may God keep me from being a cosmopolitan...I am a German, and I am German in every sense of the word. The liberty, the prosperity, and the glory of Germany...are so closely connected with the common good of Europe that Germany has not a single real interest that is not at the same time the interest of all its neighbors, and...anything that restores and sustains Germany also restores and sustains the entire social order."²⁴⁷

Supportive as he might be of a cultural nationalism, however, Gentz did not at any time look favorably upon a single centralized government for Germany, such as had developed in Britain, France, and elsewhere. German political culture was too diverse; a central ruler would have to govern with a rod of iron to keep all the constituent parts in line. Besides, given its size and geographical position, a unified Germany would itself be too much a threat to the peace and security of Europe. Some kind of federation or league was, in his mind, the most preferable solution, but how this would operate in reality was difficult to work out. He was willing, though, to embrace a solution that did not simply return Germany to conditions before 1789. At least in theory, Gentz had consistently opposed the dismemberment or annexation of an independent state, as it was both wrong in and of itself and set a bad precedent for future events. Legitimacy was almost a bedrock principle for him, and would be so in the future. But in his correspondence

²⁴⁶ Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, IV, 196-98.

²⁴⁷ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 122.

in the years 1804-6, he more than once suggested that it would be acceptable for the Holy Roman Empire to be completely reorganized and Germany divided into Prussian and Austrian halves, the better for both to cooperate against Napoleon. That effort was certainly uppermost in his mind just then, and Gentz was hardly alone in his contempt for the inefficient and archaic structures of the Empire; but such plans as he and others suggested would mean the dismantling of not only the Empire but also many of the small principalities, Church lands, knightly estates, and other territories whose sovereignty he would, in other circumstances, be considered among the first to defend. But in these circumstances, driven as he was to find some means of expelling Napoleon, he was willing to forego a few of his principles. Bending the rules within Germany was less serious than the existential threat to the peace of Europe he saw in the person of the French conqueror.²⁴⁸

This flirtation with German nationalism led Gentz to turn savagely upon any erstwhile allies who had sold out to Napoleon, while also thawing (at least for a time) towards some former opponents. The most vivid example of this came in his correspondence with the Swiss historian Johannes von Müller (1752-1809). Müller, no relation to Gentz's other friend Adam, had been patronized by the Austrian court since the 1790s, and this connection, together with his publication of texts on German history and his service as an editor for Herder, had made him a defender of German independence and a fierce opponent of Napoleon. He and Gentz had therefore been on a very friendly footing when the latter came to Vienna.²⁴⁹ By the middle of the decade, though, Müller's enthusiasm had begun to wane, and in the wake of Jena he turned his coat, seeking an audience with the victorious emperor and obtaining a position as secretary of state in the new Kingdom of Westphalia. Gentz found this intolerable, not only because of his

²⁴⁸ *Ausgewählte Schriften*, IV, 242.

²⁴⁹ Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, IV, 135.

(now former) friend's faithlessness, but because his success came simultaneous with his own continuing hardship. Consequently, in the spring of 1807 he wrote to Müller breaking off relations forever. Though damning his correspondent's "soul of the very weakest sort" and accusing his life of being "a continual capitulation," Gentz ended on a semi-forgiving note, though it was also a reaffirmation of "the good cause":

As a warrior in a holy cause I pronounce an inexorable judgment of damnation upon your criminal apostasy; as a man, as your former friend, I feel nothing but sympathy for you. To hate you is more than I am capable of doing. If God brings our hopes to realization and crowns with success my labors and the labors of others who believe as I do, you may expect just one single punishment, but it is all-important: order and rule by law will return; the robbers and the usurper will fall; Germany—free, happy, honored, governed by wise rulers—will bloom again!²⁵⁰

It is a harsh verdict, but it also leaves no doubt of his commitment to the cause, if not of German nationalism, then certainly of liberating the land from Napoleon.

Meanwhile, during this same period, Gentz moderated his earlier opinions on the nationalist views of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a man from whom, on most political questions, he could not have been more different, at least not before 1806. Up to this time, in fact, he had taken issue with those of his friends who found something to admire in the philosopher. In 1803, for example, his correspondence with Brinckmann was full of amazement at the Swede's complimentary attitude towards Fichte. "I admit that {his philosophy} is completely consistent," Gentz wrote, with obvious sarcasm, but he dismissed Fichte's "I" vs. "Not-I" dichotomy as "radical absurdity" and "the nonsense of nonsense." "My philosophical, speculative, or rather my purely poetical and human hatred towards Fichte knows no bounds," he concluded.²⁵¹ This is not, needless to say, especially helpful as a means of refutation, but other allusions to Fichte's

²⁵⁰ Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, IV, 272-74. Müller, perhaps fortunately for himself, did not live to see this prophecy fulfilled, dying in 1809.

²⁵¹ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, II, 303.

philosophical system, especially his tendency to manufacture terms out of whole cloth (“the nonrepresentable nothing,” for example) and the overly abstract nature of his thought in general, indicate that he appeared to Gentz as an ideologue who was all the more dangerous for being so gifted. Nor was he the only one to react so. Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, dismissed Fichte as a man who went “chasing after ideas” and contributed nothing of value to German intellectual life.²⁵²

In his extremity after Jena, however, Gentz toned down his criticism of Fichte for a time. In June 1808, he wrote to Adam Müller of his “enthusiasm” and “boundless pleasure” when reading Fichte’s recently-published *Addresses to the German Nation*: “Nothing I have read for a long time has so surprised me,” he wrote. “Almost no one has ever spoken so magnificently, so profoundly, so proudly of the German nation.”²⁵³ This praise is all the more surprising in that Gentz had earlier spoken of Müller to third parties as the man best suited to go into literary battle against “that Baal.” He did not go into specifics about just what it was in Fichte that he admired so much; he praised the earnestness and honesty with which the author expressed himself, and the aforementioned manner in which he defended the qualities of the German people, but Gentz otherwise had little to say on Fichte’s actual statements, and indeed ruefully admitted his disbelief that the same man who fifteen years earlier had been prolific in his praise of the French Revolution could now be saying these things. He did not, even now, look with favor on the philosopher’s practical recommendations, such as national mobilization, but he nonetheless found his praise of the German character laudable.

For all these reasons, and partly also from the influence of Stein’s presence, Gentz once more began to hope, early in 1809, that with resentment building throughout Europe, a large-

²⁵² Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 146.

²⁵³ *Briefwechse zwischen Gentz und Müller*, 147-49.

scale popular uprising in Spain, and growing signs of exhaustion among the French themselves, the time might be right for another try at Napoleon. Austria seemed to think so, too. The pro-war faction that included Stadion and Archduke Johann had never really gone away, and after France's dethroning of the Spanish Bourbons, it was not difficult for them to persuade Emperor Francis that a fresh fight was preferable to meekly suffering the same fate. With the hope of financial aid from Britain, Francis resolved on war in December 1808, and the following February, Gentz was summoned to the capital once more. He was given his own room at the Staatskanzlei, the Austrian chancellery, which he would occupy for most of the rest of his career, and assigned the task of drawing up the official declaration of war.²⁵⁴ Gentz was elated. "The experience of the ages has taught us," he wrote, "that all human acts and endeavors, especially the unjust and the violent, prosper only up to a certain point. Napoleon appears to have reached his limit...his star, of such evil portent for the world, has unquestionably begun to set."²⁵⁵

This was the preface to a long proposal he wrote out while at Toeplitz and handed to Stadion upon his return to Vienna that February. In this memorandum, Gentz outlined a plan whereby Austria would gather under its leadership as many of the German states as possible, kindle the fires of patriotism in the breasts of the German people, and fling Napoleon back across the Rhine. This is putting it a bit tritely, for Gentz recognized that it would not be an easy task. Bavaria and Württemberg were lost causes, for the time being, Saxony would only come over if there was a genuine momentum shift, and forging a new Austro-Prussian alliance would require careful negotiations. Still, he thought it could be done. Prussia had enough strength left, even after Jena and Friedberg, to quickly assemble an army of 80,000 men; Saxony and most of northern Germany could then easily be secured, and the Austrian-led coalition would send

²⁵⁴ Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 192.

²⁵⁵ *Aus dem Nachlasse von Gentz*, II, 104.

Napoleon an ultimatum, from a position of strength, for the removal of his forces from German soil. If he refused, as seemed likely, a war would be necessary, but in the meantime (under Gentz's plan), the assorted kings, emperors, dukes, and princes would have communicated to the German people their desire for a new federative state that would be truly national. Once they realized that this was indeed a fight for Germany's freedom, the common people would rise up—one can especially see Stein at work here—and overwhelm the French, especially if (again as planned) this new campaign was fought with the active support of other powers, particularly Britain. Napoleon would be evicted from Central Europe, and given his simultaneous difficulties elsewhere, especially in Spain, that might mean the end of him as a conqueror.²⁵⁶

And what of this new federal state that was to emerge once the smoke cleared? Gentz had already given some thought about reconciling German nationalism with peace in Europe, and spent considerable effort describing his vision for it; indeed, it may have been his most elaborate attempt at constitution-writing. In his system, the Emperor of Austria would be perpetual President of the state and hold most of the executive power, assisted in legislation by a Congress drawn from the member states and meeting once a year at Regensburg. Each member state would retain absolute autonomy over its internal affairs, but would be barred from making alliances with foreign powers, would have to accept arbitration by the central government in case of a dispute with another member, and must also yield to that government the chief military power. Such a state would resemble the Articles of Confederation in the early United States more than anything, and Gentz intended it that way. A fully united Germany would be too much of a threat to the rest of Europe, just as a conquered and subdued Germany made the rest of the continent unstable. "The independence of Germany," he went on, growing more optimistic, "is the first

²⁵⁶ *Aus dem Nachlasse*, II, 153.

political consideration, the chief common interest of Europe. If it can be guaranteed by an auspicious and vigorous organization such as we must endeavor to achieve, order, equilibrium, and peace will return once more.”²⁵⁷

It was a bold plan. Gentz was certainly proud of it, for it seemed to him a boon for both the Austrian government he served and the German national cause for which he felt such sympathy. How it could have worked in its original form, though, is scarcely conceivable. Any number of objections could be raised the longer one thinks about it, but in particular, it seems incredible that Gentz expected Prussia to submit and play second fiddle to Austria in perpetuity. Not that his native land was singled out for abuse—on the contrary, he warmly described its fidelity to the “common cause”—but under his plan, it would be on no more than an equal footing with all other German states except Austria, which would of course enjoy supremacy through its Emperor-President. Not only could it no longer jockey for power independently as it had done throughout the eighteenth century, *and* relinquish control, to a great degree, of the army that had made it famous, Gentz even proposed to redistribute some of its western Rhenish territories to other states (such as Hannover) on the theory that these made no sense where they were.²⁵⁸ Given the course of Prussian policy over the past several decades, and the well-known belief among its citizens that nothing could be good for Germany that was not good for Prussia, there is hardly any set of circumstances in which Berlin would have agreed to this plan. And without its cooperation, it seems doubtful that the system could have worked at all.

²⁵⁷ *Aus dem Nachlasse*, II, 156-57.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 146-47. The only explanation I can think of for why Gentz expected this to work is that he thought Prussia was too crippled after its last disastrous war to oppose the rest of Germany and would have to fall in line. But this seems hard to square with his earlier confidence that it could quickly put a “battle-ready” army in the field.

Gentz's plan, then, even if it had been taken seriously by the Austrian government (which it was not), seems doomed to failure. Yet it was not a total loss. The German Confederation that did emerge after Napoleon's defeat, with its federal system headed by Austria, was certainly an echo of his blueprint, even if significantly changed from what he originally proposed.

In any case, the 1809 war Gentz helped to fan did nothing to advance his aims. Whereas at its outset he seemed to think this was the culmination of all the years of combat—"The decision has been made to escape from the previously desperate situation by a mighty exertion of forces. Austria will not lay down arms until a decisive result has been achieved"—by midsummer he had had to eat fistfuls of crow.²⁵⁹ If Prussia's attempt in 1806 had been a farce, this was a parody even of that. Not that the combatants were not serious enough—the first popular insurrection against Napoleon in Germany began at this time, in the Tyrol region, and there was briefly reason to hope that between Austria, Spain, and a British attack on Holland, the emperor might indeed be in some difficulties. But nothing came of it. Napoleon's position in Italy and the south German states was too strong, and the north German rising Stein had led Gentz to believe in fizzled. Archduke Karl's army did have some early success in invading Bavaria, but Napoleon quickly marshaled his forces and, after some inconclusive engagements, dealt the Austrians a decisive blow at the Battle of Wagram, not far from their capital, on July 5-6. After a few short months back in the city, Gentz was forced (as were others) to beat a hasty retreat for Bohemia once more. The war, such as it was, ended with French troops marching into Vienna once more, Stadion's forced removal from the government, and France's annexation of the Adriatic coast.

²⁵⁹ *Briefwechsel mit Stein*, III, 49.

These were the terms of the Treaty of Schönbrunn, signed that same year, which Gentz felt compelled to defend, not only because his position required it but because he had reluctantly come to agree that the empire could not keep this up. Though he blamed Archduke Karl for bungling the campaign, the fact was that after Wagram, even a severe peace was desirable. “To prolong...this war for a few provinces more or less, when *all* the military odds are evidently and probably against us, appears to me to verge on a vain delusion,” he wrote in a letter.²⁶⁰

The period between Ulm and Wagram was the peak of Gentz’s German nationalism, or at least of his open expression of it. Repeatedly between 1805 and 1809, Prussia and Austria, time and time again, attempted to overthrow the Napoleonic empire, and time and time again they failed. This last effort by the Habsburgs had ended with Gentz once more having to flee Vienna ahead of French troops, the paying of a huge indemnity to Paris and, perhaps even more humiliating, an alliance cemented by the marriage of Emperor Francis’ daughter to Napoleon. In retrospect, military and diplomatic historians have pointed out that the events of 1809-10 were not so humiliating as they then appeared. Wagram had been a hard-won battle in which the Austrians, due in part to their adoption of the corps system, had fought very tenaciously, and cost Napoleon forty of his generals. The emperor’s subsequent marriage to Marie-Louise, meanwhile, could certainly be considered a personal triumph for the Corsican and a blow to the prestige of one of the oldest dynasties in Europe, but it was also a further aggravation to his ally Tsar Alexander, and an early sign of the brewing trouble with Russia. This last was not clearly visible at the time, though, and Gentz was never a very military-minded man, so if he was despondent in the aftermath of Austrian defeat, it is certainly understandable.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 70-71.

²⁶¹ See Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars: An International History* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books Ltd., 2007), 396-400, 408-12. The marriage to Marie-Louise, though not a significant issue to Alexander, was annoying

By the summer of 1809, Gentz personally had come around to the opinion that peace, for the foreseeable future, was necessary after all, and that nationalistic zeal, having shot its bolt, would have to take a back seat. He continued to play his various functions in and out of the Austrian government, and on the side kept up his collaboration with Müller and Heinrich von Kleist in Dresden to promote the Austrian cause through literature—one incidental result of this was Gentz’s arranging the showing of von Kleist’s play *Das Käzchen von Heilbronn* in Vienna—but even this became of less and less importance. Such resistance as could be offered to Napoleon was, for now, of the most passive sort: the hope “that at least the minds who truly believe in a good and great cause will never cease to understand one another.”²⁶²

But he was a man without a purpose. He felt he could not abandon Austria, or for that matter Russia, and yet both were formally allies of Napoleon and enemies of Britain, the remaining combatant. All his efforts since coming to Vienna, it seemed, had been in vain. “At first this year was bright with hope,” he wrote in his diary in late 1809, but that hope had now been dashed: “my plans wrecked, the dreams of my life’s most beautiful period shattered, nothing before me but a monotonous, fruitless existence. I have a feeling, too, that the whole thing will come to an end before very long.”²⁶³ He continued, as we have seen, to write about politics, but he could hardly be blamed for doubting his works would have much impact anymore. Probably he was not even much enthused when, in that same year (1809), the Emperor appointed his old acquaintance, Count Klemens von Metternich, as Foreign Minister.

because of prior French negotiations for the hand of his sister Anna, so that the sudden announcement concerning the Habsburg princess appeared as a slight to the Romanovs.

²⁶² *Briefwechsel mit Stein*, September 29, 1809.

²⁶³ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 68-9.

Chapter 6

Klemens Wenzel Nepomuk Lothar, Prince von Metternich-Winneburg zu Beilstein (1773-1859), Gentz's superior for the last twenty-odd years of his life, is deservedly one of the most famous statesmen of nineteenth-century Europe. Born at Koblenz to one of the oldest and most distinguished noble families in Germany, and one with a long tradition of serving as court officials and diplomats to the monarchs and territorial princes of the Empire, the future Austrian Chancellor was educated at the Universities of Strasbourg and Mainz before following in his father's footsteps as an ambassador for the Habsburgs. The wars of the French Revolution were a formative experience for the young Metternich. He not only observed the new form of warfare the revolutionaries were bringing to the battlefield, and its connection to mass politics, he also was deeply affected by the progressive dismantling of the Old Regime in the German states, including the French appropriation in 1794 of most of the Metternich family's Rhenish estates. Personally, Metternich was not a reactionary or a hide-bound traditionalist; as a young man, he supported the reforms of enlightened absolutism, such as eliminating the remaining aspects of feudalism for the peasantry. Like so many of his generation, however (including Gentz), he was permanently affected by his experiences of the Revolution. Watching popular demonstrations in Strasbourg in 1789, he referred to "the people" in their abstract form as "a drunken mob" (they were, after all, sacking the city hall at the time). Like any good conservative, he was henceforth very suspicious of any constitution or political program created from whole cloth, and considered any invocation of "popular will" to be inviting dictatorship; but more than anything, Metternich was a realist. He would wink at innovations, even sweeping ones, if only they could be stabilized within the broader structures of order and continuity. Like Gentz, then, he was essentially a

figure of the Counter- Enlightenment, and it was this that allowed them to have such a long and fruitful partnership.²⁶⁴

Gentz and Metternich met for the first time in 1802, when the latter was Austrian minister to Saxony and the former was passing through Dresden in the course of his fateful move from Berlin to Vienna. The two got along well early on, and Gentz had lobbied in 1805 for the young count to be made head of government in Vienna.²⁶⁵ Relations between them had cooled considerably by 1809, however, largely due to the time Metternich spent as minister to France. Gentz's surviving papers do not explain this change directly, but partly it had to do with his own continued bellicose stance toward Napoleon, while Metternich was inclining more toward a conciliatory policy. A born diplomat, he was bound to view events from a "glass-half-full" perspective, rather than through the lens of ideology; this, plus a natural optimism (at least during the period of their association), led Gentz to describe him as inclined "always and in all circumstances to view the world in rose-colored light"—something of which he himself was incapable. It seemed to him at times that Metternich was far too slippery and evasive for the work of defeating Napoleon.

Partly, too, Gentz was coming to learn what everyone else would soon be aware of—Metternich was an incorrigible womanizer, and much worse, a poor one. "Metternich loves women without ruling them," he wrote to Brinckmann. "That is his weak side."²⁶⁶ Gentz did not

²⁶⁴ There are, of course, a number of useful biographies on Metternich and his era. Some of the more notable are Arthur May's *The Age of Metternich 1814-1848* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1933); Henry Kissinger's *A World Restored*; Alan Palmer's *Metternich: Councillor of Europe* (London: Orion, 1972); Franz Herre's *Metternich: Staatsmann des Friedens* (Augsburg: Bechtermünz Verlag, 1997), Heinrich von Srbik, *Metternich. Der Staatsmann und der Mensch*, 3 vols (Munich: Bruckmann, 1954), and most recently, Wolfram Siemann's *Metternich: Stratege und Visionär* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2016).

²⁶⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, xx-xxii, 1-4.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, II, 136-37. Gentz made a similar comment about Wilhelm von Humboldt's wife Karoline, who was very vocal about political matters and with whom he often did not get along, as she considered him a turncoat and repeatedly said so. See *Briefe von Gentz an Pilat*, I, 25.

exactly have much room to talk on this point, for his own dalliances with “the fairer sex” were nearly as frequent. In Vienna as in Berlin, he seemed to fall in and out of love on a regular basis, with aristocrats as well as actresses. For at least a couple years, he had a steady relationship with a lower-class woman who joined his household and bore him an illegitimate son, Josef; but at the same time he was having brief affairs with a variety of higher-ranking female acquaintances who found themselves sojourning in Bohemia.²⁶⁷ Gentz’s assessment of Metternich, though, is not entirely hypocritical, for while he often imagined himself to be in love, he rarely if ever allowed his feelings to run away with him, a point many of the women who knew him complained about.²⁶⁸ Though the opposite was not always true of Metternich, he did display a tendency to let his personal romances interfere with his political agendas, especially during the time of the Congress of Vienna.²⁶⁹ Gentz’s assessment of his chief, then, misogynistic as it may have been, was not entirely unjust.

The new Foreign Minister, for his part, was aware of Gentz’s vanity and tendency to gossip, not to mention the previous displays of extremism that had set him at odds with official Austrian policy; throughout the many years of their association, he always was careful of how much knowledge of his maneuvers he let slip to Gentz, and Gentz knew it. Nonetheless, by 1809, the two men were nearly of one mind on the international policy now required—to wit, playing for time until a favorable opportunity arose to once again openly oppose the French Empire.

The two men had a strong ideological kinship, enjoyed each other’s company, and could in many ways be called intimates over the next twenty-odd years of their association. During the

²⁶⁷ Gentz references Josef in *Tagebücher*, I, 63. There was also an unnamed daughter.

²⁶⁸ Henriette Bissing, *Das Leben der Dichterin Amalie von Helvig* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1889), 137-38.

²⁶⁹ Of particular note is Metternich’s involvement with Duchess Wilhelmine von Sagan in 1814-15 in the midst of the Congress. There are several accounts of this, one being Dorothy McGuigan, *Metternich and the Duchess* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

crises of 1813, the two of them (and sometimes Gentz's old friend Humboldt) would stroll the streets of Prague together at night, joking, philosophizing, and everything in between. "We argue the great questions of the moment," Gentz jotted down, "and we talk of war and peace as if we were three simple *Landjunker*."²⁷⁰ After Gentz's death, Metternich would lament the passing of one of the few men with whom he had been able to share his innermost thoughts.²⁷¹ But the relationship was not without its friction, an element that would only intensify over time. Though Gentz was nine years Metternich's senior, and often certain that he knew better when the two disagreed, there was never any doubt as to who was the dominant partner in the relationship. The attitude of the Austrian nobility toward writers and all those who lived by their wits has already been mentioned, and much the same could be said for Metternich--not a native Austrian but definitely one of the high aristocracy. Much as he prized his companion's advice and intellect, he often subjected Gentz "to a friendship that suggests the familiarity between master and valet."²⁷² This was done in a myriad of ways, formal and informal, but all reminded him of where he stood in the pecking order. When one reads Gentz's journal entries for this period, especially before and during the Vienna Congress, his subordinate status is unmistakable. Metternich sat at the table with the leading powers of Europe, and Gentz afterward learned only what the prince wished him to know. For a man who prided himself on his intellectual independence, this must have been difficult indeed to bear, but as someone who had defended the prerogatives of the nobility, there was little he could do about it.

One rather insignificant anecdote may (or may not) give further indication of the nature of the relationship Metternich and Gentz had. During the Congress of Vienna, and shortly after

²⁷⁰ Friedrich Gentz, *Briefe von Friedrich von Gentz an Pilat*, Karl Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, ed. (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1868), 40.

²⁷¹ Metternich, *Nachgelassene Papiere*, V, 253.

²⁷² Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 37.

Napoleon had escaped from Elba and returned to Paris in triumph, Gentz woke to find by his bed a copy of the city's morning daily, the *Wiener Zeitung*. On the front page was an announcement, with Napoleon's signature underneath: "Reward. 10,000 ducats. To whosoever delivers Friedrich von Gentz, the well-known publicist, dead or alive, or simply produces proof of his murder." Given the danger he had periodically faced for his anti-Napoleon tracts during the wars, this was hardly a threat Gentz could take lightly. Nor did he. When two of his acquaintances, Duchess Dorothee von Sagan and Count Karl Clam-Martinitz called on him later that morning, they found his apartment full of half-packed luggage and the man himself almost in a state of nervous collapse. "Look at the front page," Gentz cried, tossing the newspaper to them, "I've got to get out of town." Dorothee, who recorded the incident (and knew quite a bit about its origin), suggested that Gentz take a look at the date on the front page. It was April 1.

Not much more was needed to figure out that Metternich had put together a rather wicked prank to celebrate the day. Gentz quickly recovered and later claimed that he hadn't been fooled for a minute, though those who had seen him at the time described him as "almost paralyzed." It had been a good joke, and Gentz did not seem to hold a grudge against his employer, then or later. It is quite impossible, however, to imagine him daring to do anything similar to Metternich.²⁷³

Be that as it may, the two of them needed each other. Metternich was one of the best suited men to forestall further aggrandizement by Napoleon in Central Europe, and Gentz's skill as a writer and publicist was unrivaled. Though there was never any doubt about who was the senior partner in the relationship, it may be said that when it came to giving concrete form to his

²⁷³ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 369. See also Rosalynn Pflaum, *By Influence and Desire: The True Story of Three Extraordinary Women--The Grand Duchess of Courland and Her Daughters* (1984), 257, and Bernstorff, I, 180.

policies, Metternich depended more on Gentz than on anyone else. Surviving drafts of memoranda show that after sketching the main points of what he wanted, he left the rest up to Gentz and often adopted what the latter had produced almost unchanged. It cannot be said, as one historian suggested, that the system of 1815-30 ought to be called Gentz's rather than Metternich's, but there is also no doubt that without Gentz, the Restoration in Central Europe would not have existed in the same form known to us.²⁷⁴

Thus, despite many strains, their association never unraveled, and it was this which shaped German-speaking Europe for the next several decades. And from the junior partner's point of view, it was a very beneficial one; already in 1809, Gentz had been recalled from his quasi-exile in Bohemia and took up an office of his own in the *Staatskanzlei*, where he would remain for the rest of his career, and as Metternich's position became more secure in the next few years, his stock, too, rose within the Austrian government. In 1812 Gentz received the long-coveted title of *Hofrat*, or court councilor, marking him as an official part of the government.²⁷⁵ Moreover, the problem of uncertain income that came with being in an unofficial free-lance position was resolved that same year. The principality of Wallachia in modern Romania, technically a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, had for a long time been a client state of Russia as well to maintain its semi-independence, but in 1812 the new ruling prince, or *hospodar*, instead sought a relationship with the Austrians, and Gentz was made his official correspondent, tasked with keeping the prince informed on political and diplomatic affairs and the general European situation. This assignment not only allowed a significant upgrade in his standard of living (which

²⁷⁴ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 226, 264.

²⁷⁵ Ironically, Gentz was forced to request, rather sheepishly, that this honor not be made public, as he had long since let it be known that he had possessed the title of *Hofrat* for years. The incident speaks to Gentz's talent for self-promotion, but also to the near-necessity of such self-promotion in a Viennese society obsessed with noble pedigree.

would have been even greater if he weren't such a spendthrift), it would turn out to be a boon for historians, as his reports to the *hospodar* constitute one of the most detailed and extensive primary sources on European political events for the 1810s and '20s.²⁷⁶ In the years to come, Metternich would use him as not only an adviser but a troubleshooter in widely varied areas of the government: in finance, in German affairs, in "Oriental" (meaning Ottoman-Middle Eastern) affairs, in press censorship, and so on. For a span of about fifteen years, Gentz had as much position and influence as he could ever have hoped for.

One thing was clear at the outset, though: in order for Metternich to use Gentz, there must no longer be such open vituperation of Napoleon. Like it or not, the French and Austrian empires were allies now. Even as the dust was settling from Wagram, the new minister had given Emperor Francis a gloomy assessment of the situation: "Whatever the conditions of the peace may be...we shall find our safety only by accommodating ourselves to the triumphant system of France." "My principles are unchangeable," he added, "but to necessity we must yield...For us there remains but one expedient: to increase our strength for better days, to work out our preservation by gentle means, without looking back upon our former course."²⁷⁷ Chastised by defeat after defeat, Gentz could not but agree with these conclusions. He had (albeit reluctantly) called for peace after Wagram, and more or less succeeded in holding his tongue in the aftermath of the new treaty. He saw clearly that Bonaparte was, for now, the master of Europe, and that it would take time for Austria to build up its strength and make another try. Metternich assured him

²⁷⁶ These reports are contained in the *Dépêches Inédites du Chevalier de Gentz aux Hospodars de Valachie, pour servir à l'histoire de la politique européenne, 1813-1828*, Count Anton Prokesch von Osten, ed., 3 vols (Paris: E. Plon, 1876). Though his dispatches to the hospodar were rarely impartial, they shed a great deal of light on the actions of the Austrian government at critical junctures in the 1810s and '20s—at the Congress of Vienna, for example, during which Gentz included both the latest news and his own evaluations of the proceedings.

²⁷⁷ Clemens Metternich, *Memoirs of Prince Metternich*, ed. Richard Metternich, trans. Mrs. Alexander Napier (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1880), II, 365.

that when the time was right, Austria would play a more independent role in negotiating a general peace for Europe, and that Gentz would have an important part in the shaping of it.

This was a flattering prospect for Gentz. Nonetheless, he found it galling, especially in view of the humiliations such a policy required. The new Franco-Austrian alliance was sealed (it appeared) by the marriage in 1810 between Napoleon and Francis' daughter Marie Louise, which Metternich had helped to arrange. Certainly to the new Foreign Minister's pragmatic mind, it was a reasonable step to take to ensure Austrian survival; but to Gentz? Probably wisely, he left no extensive record of his thoughts on this matter, but little imagination is needed to guess what a bitter pill this was for him to swallow. Ever since entering the literary world, he had repeatedly spoken of the Habsburg realm as one of the mainstays of the Old Regime, the protector of the German nation, the shield of Europe against first the Revolution and then Napoleon; and now, one of the oldest and most venerable dynasties in the world was not only laying all that aside but quite literally getting into bed with the Corsican upstart! It was almost too much. Not surprisingly, he was not invited to the wedding in Vienna, and probably he would not have wanted to attend if every monarch in Europe had been there. But he wrote of it in his diary, "The evening of the wedding ceremony...was one of the saddest of my life," adding that when he heard the cannons signaling its conclusion, he "cried like a child."²⁷⁸

Somewhat adrift for the time being, Gentz retired for much of 1810 to the baths at Toeplitz once more, where he found comfort in the remote surroundings and the company of many anti-Bonapartist Germans who had likewise flocked there. He also was visited by old friends and acquaintances, such as Goethe, and also Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom he had not seen in a decade. Yet his spirits remained low whenever he thought of the political situation and

²⁷⁸ August Fournier, *Gentz und Wessenberg: Briefe des Ersten an den Zweiten* (Vienna and Leipzig: Wilhelm Graumüller, 1907), 35.

Napoleon's supremacy, and even at this point entertained vague notions of finding refuge among the British if there was no hope left on the Continent.

Gentz's comparative silence on the subject of Napoleon is worth considering, for despite his despair over such matters as the marriage alliance, Gentz did not fire off any long memorandum to Metternich or the emperor in opposition this time. On the contrary, he was all too happy to draw up, at Metternich's request, a proposal to the British for general peace negotiations. The policy having been decided upon, any outbursts from him would be very unwelcome indeed; even so, that had not kept him from speaking his mind in the past. It is noteworthy that he did succeed in maintaining a silence where Napoleon was concerned, despite considerable pressure not to do so. Towards the end of 1809, the British government, angered by Gentz's advocacy of a quick peace with France, cut off its payments to him and did not resume them for the next two years, and among his contacts outside of Austria, there seems to have been a general impression that he had given up on the cause.²⁷⁹

This was not exactly true. During 1810 and 1811, Gentz continued to associate closely with anti-Napoleonic cliques in Vienna, including various British agents, and in private sharply contested Austrian membership in the Continental System, which Metternich had acquiesced to.²⁸⁰ But the fact that he did, willingly or otherwise, follow the government's instructions rather than openly agitate against the emperor, is significant, and with his taking up an office in the *Staatskanzlei*, this period can be seen as one in which Gentz transitioned from a semi-

²⁷⁹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 165-66.

²⁸⁰ As a curious side note, one of the anti-Napoleonic Austrians with whom Gentz was currently involved was a General Ludwig von Wallmoden, who in February 1813 was implicated in a plot to assassinate Metternich and spark an uprising against the French. It is odd, given this connection, that Gentz not only appears not to have fallen under suspicion but makes no direct reference to the events in his diary. It is entirely possible that he had been passing information along to the *Staatskanzlei* the entire time, though this is mere speculation.

independent publicist to a recognized part of the Austrian state. Not that he became a mere “yes-man” for anyone from now on: he continued to express himself quite freely to Metternich and others, in private and often in public, and was often quite passionate in pressing his views. But he had made a decision, it seems, to stand by Austria as the best of all viable options, and that sometimes meant putting its interests first. Besides, it was an arrangement from which he personally profited—not only in the monetary sense of the word (though certainly that as well), but rather in that being Metternich’s partner and adviser gave him the influence he had craved since his days as a young bureaucrat in Berlin. His words had been listened to and carefully weighed, certainly, by those at the very top, but he had only ever been one of many jockeying for the ear of those with power. From the early 1810s onward, though, he would truly be a part of the establishment, would be in the rooms where important decisions were made and adding to the conversations there, rather than on the outside looking in. This was truly more satisfactory than being a mere correspondent or a journalist or a sometime agent for the British; but it was not simply that he wanted power. As he explained it long afterward, it was also “actual political activity, and what I term, in a very modest sense of the word, my political sphere of activity.”²⁸¹

Though now part and parcel of the Austrian government, Gentz continued to pursue good relations with any foreign power displaying a modicum of anti-Napoleonic sentiment. After 1811, he began to once more receive financial support from the British Crown, in gratitude for such services as penning a defense of its paper money policy and interpretation of maritime law in the spring of 1812, and in hopes that he would prove a useful ally once the looming Franco-Russian confrontation got under way.²⁸² Moreover, through Humboldt, now ambassador to Austria, he kept up contact with Berlin, and strengthened his Russian contacts by making the

²⁸¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, II, 47.

²⁸² Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 261, 265-67.

acquaintance of the young diplomat Karl Robert Nesselrode (1780-1862), with whom he would maintain a lifelong friendship. Having already served the Tsar in a number of military and bureaucratic roles, Nesselrode would in 1814 be made State Secretary, then Russian Foreign Minister in 1816, a post he held for the next forty years. He and Gentz may have met in 1806, while attached to the Tsarist army campaigning in Germany, but they were certainly in regular correspondence by 1812, at which time Gentz was passing on information about the Austrian domestic situation and generally presuming to act as a mentor of sorts to the younger man.²⁸³ It was this pan-European network, including such men as Gentz in Austria, Humboldt in Prussia, Nesselrode in Russia, and others, that would really hold the Congress of Vienna and the post-Napoleonic peace together.

This activity took place in the background of Gentz's official duties for Austria. He could not be directly involved in foreign affairs, given his career of hostility toward Napoleon, now the ally of Vienna. For most of the early 1810s, then, Gentz stepped back a bit from the constant exchanges of international diplomacy. Though he certainly continued to keep up on the latest events concerning Napoleon's empire and campaigns, as his correspondence shows, he threw himself more than ever into Austrian domestic policy, becoming particularly engrossed in the vexing matter of Habsburg finances, left in tatters by the previous wars and indemnities. Not much has been said up to now about his role in economic affairs, which have been somewhat secondary to the purpose of this work, but without delving too deeply into these matters, it may be said that the Austrian currency was by this point, thanks to two decades of off and on warfare, near the point of collapse. The government had tried to finance the enormous debt it had incurred by issuing larger and larger amounts of paper money, dubbed "Bankozetteln," and for neither the

²⁸³ *Lettres et papiers du chancelier Comte de Nesselrode, 1760-1850*, 11 vols (Paris: A. LaHure, 1904), IV, 64-80.

first nor the last time, this scheme had blown up in its planners' faces. Inflation had skyrocketed, with the number of Bankozetteln in circulation increasing four hundred percent between 1800 and 1810; the currency was in disrepute within and without Austria, and by 1810 there were serious fears (aggravated by the latest indemnities and territorial losses suffered) that complete economic and political breakdown was in the offing.²⁸⁴

The finance minister at the time, Count Joseph von O'Donnell, considered that only a sustained effort to resuscitate public trust in the economy would give Austria the breathing space it needed to undertake a thorough reform of the currency, starting with a significant devaluation of the banknotes in order to eliminate some of the galloping inflation. Due to his particular gifts in this regard, as well as his previous involvement with financial affairs while still in Berlin, Count O'Donnell and his successor, Count Joseph Wallis, were therefore eager to obtain Gentz's support for their plans by publishing articles in defense of the paper currency and refuting calls for its abandonment. Gentz approved of the general idea, so far as it went; rejecting the claims of some (including his friend Adam Müller) that only a system based on hard cash was trustworthy, he wrote that "the invention of paper money... {was} one of the most important progressions in the course of social intercourse"; but was highly dubious about the specific means proposed. Having studied the financial crisis which brought on the French Revolution, he worried that a devaluation could have a drastic impact on Austrian credit abroad; besides, without a fundamental reform of the tax structure, this would be no more than kicking the can down the

²⁸⁴ One of the earliest substantive treatments of this financial crisis was Adolf Beer's *Die Finanzen Oesterreichs im 19. Jahrhundert* (Prague, 1877), 413-29. The most highly renowned work on the event and the overall Habsburg economy, though, is Harm-Hinrich Brandt, *Der österreichische Neoabsolutismus. Staatsfinanzen und Politik*, Vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978). For more information on Gentz's personal involvement in the Austrian response to it, see Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht: Friedrich Gentz als politischer Schriftsteller*, 232-55.

road. For that reason, he only very hesitatingly lent his support with some published articles.²⁸⁵ It was perhaps to his good fortune that he did not become more heavily involved in the issue. In 1811, seeing no other solution to the problem, Wallis devalued the paper currency by four-fifths, producing a severe (though not fatal) financial crisis. The price of commodities skyrocketed, and even the wealthy were forced to reduce expenses. The inflation crisis was stabilized; but only briefly. Once Austria was drawn into the Russian campaign of 1812, the printing presses in Vienna would be turned on again, and the market would once more be flooded with increasingly worthless paper money. This was only the latest episode in a longer pattern of financial instability that would plague Austria until the 1860s, and do significant damage to its internal and external political position. Neither Gentz nor those directly responsible for economic matters were able to get a proper grip on this problem during his lifetime.²⁸⁶

Another issue of much interest to him, and somewhat presaging his later endeavors, was the attempt to create a pro-government press in Austria. This was a project equally dear to the heart of Metternich, who as early as 1808 had had periodicals published to disseminate pro-Habsburg propaganda. In 1810, being now firmly in the driver's seat, he organized the more permanent *Oesterreichischen Beobachter*, or *Austrian Observer*, which ran until 1848. Friedrich Schlegel was the initial editor, but within a year Metternich had replaced him with Josef Anton Edler von Pilat, a young nobleman who had been his private secretary—a change underlining the fact that while the paper was officially independent, it was in reality very much under the government's thumb.

Gentz was brought into the project early on, as an occasional contributor to the *Observer* and a sort of mentor to young Pilat, but also to keep an eye on him and make sure he did not

²⁸⁵ *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Adam Müller*, 169-72.

²⁸⁶ Brandt, *Der österreichische Neoabsolutismus*, 103-111.

stray too far from the course desired by Metternich. Although the ex-secretary wished to please his employer, he also wanted the newspaper he ran to be a successful and at least semi-independent one, which naturally led to clashes. At such times, Gentz was necessarily a sort of mediator between the two, which could be difficult, as some of the three-way correspondence indicates. Nonetheless, Gentz and Pilat generally remained on good terms, and kept up a close association during the next two decades.²⁸⁷

Perhaps the most definitive evidence to be found of Gentz's newfound moderation in international affairs comes from his letters in the year 1811. The start of the year had provided the most emphatic evidence yet that the alliance between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander was close to total breakdown. Due to the former's repeated violations of the terms of Tilsit and the strains placed on Russia by the Continental Blockade, Alexander had come to believe a war was inevitable and that it would therefore be better to deliver than to receive the blow. Consequently, he not only made overtures to the Poles but wrote to Emperor Francis that February, pledging the eastern territories of Moldavia and Wallachia to Austria in return for its support; similar offers were extended to Prussia and Sweden. This was the very coalition (potentially, at least) Gentz had so often insisted upon as a precondition for defeating Napoleon, though nothing came of it this time: the project fizzled for reasons mostly not important here, although it is worth noting that Metternich persuaded Francis to turn down the idea on Austria's part.²⁸⁸

How much Gentz knew of the scheme is uncertain: his letters at the time make no direct mention of it, but certain phrases indicate that he was at least cognizant of the basic facts, and it

²⁸⁷ Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 284-93.

²⁸⁸ *Memoirs of Prince Metternich*, II, 492-94. Most of the biographies of Metternich take the position that by 1811 he expected war to break out between France and Russia eventually, but was unwilling to side against Napoleon. Whether this was because he believed it the wrong time for re-entry into the conflict, or because he expected the French to be victorious and wished to place Austria on the winning side, though, is a matter of some debate.

may have been one of the issues on which he was in opposition to Metternich. Yet despite Alexander's efforts being essentially in line with what he had been proposing from 1804 to 1809, he showed no inclination to beat the war drum. Far from it: "The outbreak of a new Continental war is perhaps very near," he wrote to an acquaintance that spring, but "the most for which we can strive in this war...is complete peace and neutrality."²⁸⁹ The date of this letter is important, for reasons to be discussed below.

During this same period, Gentz frequently had as his companion Adam Müller, who was now in Vienna with his family. As Gentz later recorded in his memoirs, the two men had many long and earnest talks on the subject of religion, with Müller urging him to follow his own example and convert to Catholicism.²⁹⁰ Had Gentz converted at this time, it would not have been inconvenient to his career and social position. The Habsburg Empire was, of course, officially and unofficially Catholic, and a conversion might have demonstrated the depth of his loyalty to Austria. Moreover, he would have been in good company, for Müller was hardly the only intellectual taking such a step. And with the deaths, at about this time, of his father and his younger brother Heinrich, it might have provided him some personal comfort. Gentz never explains in detail what his true feelings on religion and the reality of God are, but at no point, when perusing his correspondence, memoirs, and treatises, does the reader get the sense that either meant that much to him. His early papers, commenting on the legacy of the religious wars of the early modern period, give the impression that, like many *Aufklärer*, he was skeptical of the clergy's claims to authority, seeing only their past abuses of power and the violence which religious dogmatism could and did engender. Something, at any rate, was holding him back from adhering to an established church, for though he speaks of a strong "secret tendency" toward

²⁸⁹ Gentz, *Briefwechsel*, 193.

²⁹⁰ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 263-64.

Catholicism at the time of his conversations with Müller, he also came out of them practically certain that he would never follow through on that tendency.²⁹¹

Curiously, Gentz's diary and correspondence from the latter part of 1812 are relatively inattentive concerning Napoleon's Russian campaign, although everyone had seen the war coming since the previous summer at least. Despite having taken part as recently as the end of 1811 in anti-Bonapartist clubs that included General Wallmoden and more than one British agent, he had by now tamped down his more violent outbursts of the past against the French conqueror, for more than one reason, and like many in Europe, having witnessed triumph after triumph against sundry enemies, he assumed (much like Napoleon himself, ironically) that Russia would be beaten much as Austria or Prussia had been.²⁹² At most, he hoped that the campaign would be a costly one for Napoleon, who would then be forced to loosen his hold on the rest of Europe. It soon became clear, however, that the *Grande Armée* had been decimated and its commander forced to flee Russia in humiliation, that the Tsar's armies were taking the war into Germany, and that the situation in Central Europe was about to change dramatically.

Possibly it was this campaign which convinced Gentz that the tide had turned, that Napoleon would no longer be able to play the conqueror. A letter to Lord Mackintosh the following February showed his new confidence, going so far as to chide the English for still regarding the emperor as a bogeyman. "Here in Vienna," he boasted, "we lost our fear of Bonaparte some time ago."²⁹³ This was, of course, entirely untrue, but it suggests a conviction that France would no longer be able to oppress and dismember Austria. At the same time,

²⁹¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 264.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 268, 270-71.

²⁹³ Fournier, *Gentz und Wessenberg*, 148-60.

though, an entirely different fear became uppermost in his thoughts. Pushed by the more zealous among his officers, Prussia's Friedrich Wilhelm III finally abandoned his alliance with France and threw in with Tsar Alexander instead. In March 1813, both monarchs issued the momentous Declaration of Kalisch, in which the Prussian king spoke of Napoleon's defeat as the sacred duty of every German, noble and commoner alike, and even endorsed a popular rebellion against the French.²⁹⁴ To those who still viewed this era of conflict as essentially an ideological war, such a statement from one of the leading houses in Germany was indeed startling. Such weapons of the Jacobins as the *levee en masse* were now being endorsed, it seemed, by the status quo in order to defeat their heir. Whatever the military necessity, this seemed to set a troubling precedent for those who desired the restoration of Europe as it had existed before 1789.

This requires a return to the problem that had vexed Gentz (and others) for most of the last decade: how the Old Regime, forced to respond to the new methods of modern warfare used by Napoleon, could use those weapons and yet still preserve itself. Unfortunately, Gentz's diary from the first half of 1813 is lost—likely destroyed—so our information on his thinking during this critical time is not as full as it could be, but his correspondence is intact, and it is clear from this that he was extremely conflicted by the prospect of a new war against the French Empire. On the one hand, his feelings toward Napoleon and what he represented had not really changed: though regarding him as an incomparably great man when it came to talent and personality, Gentz thought him wicked for the uses to which those gifts had been put, and epithets like “the monster” continued to litter his correspondence. “As a man, as a moral witness of this world tragedy,” he wrote to Metternich, reviewing the situation, “it would be more fitting for me to welcome his fall.”²⁹⁵ But in sober middle age, he could contemplate the possibility that

²⁹⁴ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 358-64.

²⁹⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 170.

Napoleon's downfall would pose as many problems to the peace of France in particular and Europe in general as his conquests had previously done. From the point of view of Austria, the total defeat and destruction of Napoleon was of no great benefit. A powerful but restrained France, willing to play the diplomatic game, was not a danger to it. When Gentz put on his ideologue's hat, though, the fervent patriotic and pan-German movements sweeping through Prussia especially were far more threatening. This attitude was already setting him apart from some of his erstwhile compatriots—Stein, for example, who had entered Russian service after being forced out at Berlin, and who openly hoped for a German federative union under tsarist protection. Gentz did not have a direct falling out with Stein—who in fact offered him, about this time, a spot on the new commission for administering the conquered German territories—but he could not give support to his friend's claim that the German princes had forfeited their sovereignty by becoming allies of Napoleon. And his curt dismissal of the work of some of the nationalist poets like Ernst Moritz Arndt, whom Stein ardently supported, definitely led to a cooling of relations between the two. Things remained more cordial with Humboldt, who, pushing back against Metternich's fixation on peace during the difficult negotiations in June, wrote to his wife that "Gentz is an unbelievable help [to the Prussian position].... Stadion is always looking for an honorable way out."²⁹⁶ Even here, though, the two differed sharply on some of the Prussian patriotic societies, such as the Tugendbund (League of Virtue), which Stein saw as a natural and healthy reaction to French oppression, but which to Gentz had obvious revolutionary connotations. On these and other topics, the two men soon found it easier simply to avoid conversation.

²⁹⁶ Humboldt, *Briefe*, IV, 40.

This confused mix of motives would lead Gentz to some rather startling and controversial positions during the winter of 1813-14 and afterwards. For the present, though, it was clear that for his cherished “balance of powers” system to work, Napoleon must be defeated and made to play ball. Therefore, during the spring and summer he was all in favor of taking a firm stance against the French—far more so, in fact, than were his superior and his sovereign. “Only Metternich and Emperor Franz,” he wrote at this time, “are going to work [for peace] in good faith. Nobody really wants peace.”²⁹⁷ In fact, Metternich was downright desperate to avoid committing Austria to the newly-formed alliance against Napoleon; until late July he worked feverishly to bring about general peace negotiations, long after everyone else had given the idea up as futile. Gentz, for his part, was willing to support peace overtures under the right conditions. Austria, Prussia, and Russia ought to present a broad front when dealing with Napoleon, but they ought not to be too heavy-handed. The conqueror should be offered the chance to remain at the head of an enlarged and powerful France in return for significant concessions elsewhere; only in the event of his refusal should further hostilities be undertaken. To this end, during March 1813 he worked with Metternich on a carefully worded proposal to be delivered to Napoleon by Count Schwarzenberg, the Austrian envoy to France, that a peace congress be assembled at Prague embracing France, Austria, Russia, and various other powers. “A masterpiece of principles and reasoning,” Gentz later described it, “with which Napoleon himself was struck.”²⁹⁸

Unfortunately for Gentz’s plans, “struck” did not exclude refusal. Napoleon was already raising a new army and refused to have anything to do with such a congress. Likely he understood that anti-French sentiment was now too strong among the Russians and Prussians for them to sheath their own swords. “Oh, that I could buy the beginning of this victory with my

²⁹⁷ Fournier, *Gentz und Wessenberg*, 81.

²⁹⁸ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 264.

heart's blood!" exclaimed Wilhelm von Humboldt's wife Caroline, and Tsar Alexander had already demanded the restoration of Prussia's 1806 borders as a precondition for any peace.²⁹⁹ It was not surprising, then, that negotiations would eventually fall apart. Two battles were fought at Lützen and Bautzen in May between Napoleon and the Prusso-Russian coalition; though French victories on balance, these clashes were inconclusive enough and costly enough that an armistice was agreed upon. Shortly afterwards, at the beginning of June, with Austria still neutral and being pressed by all sides to make a choice, the Habsburg government effectively decamped and headed north to Bohemia. Metternich, Emperor Franz, Gentz himself, and a host of other functionaries took up residence in and around Prague, and spent the next weeks in a series of conferences, social engagements, and private meetings with the French, Prussians, Russians, and other parties that in many ways anticipated the Congress of Vienna. Though Metternich still had ambitions of keeping Austria neutral and acting as the mediator of a new general peace, these were rendered increasingly moot by the angry response of the Prussians and Russians (and to a lesser extent the British, from whom Austria was hoping to secure a generous financial subsidy and thereby stabilize its economy), but above all by the French refusal to accept negotiation. Metternich's attempts to convince Napoleon to make peace, especially the famous meeting between them in July, ended with the latter thundering he would rather die than allow his enemies to dictate peace to him.³⁰⁰ It was therefore increasingly evident that Austria would enter the war on the Allied side.

Gentz was in Prague by now, conferring with Metternich, and would remain there for the next few months after the Habsburg commencement of hostilities, acting as "the intermediary in

²⁹⁹ Wilhelm and Caroline von Humboldt, *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, ed. Anna von Sydow (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler, 1910), IV, 37.

³⁰⁰ Metternich-Klinkowstrom, *Memoirs*, I, 192.

all important political relations between Vienna and the headquarters, the channel of all authentic news, the centre of all diplomatic circles and of all diplomacy,” as he put it. Reiff goes so far as to say that he was “the actual civil head of the government in Prague”; true or not, it was a very comfortable post for him, and presaged his diplomatic activity in the coming years.³⁰¹

Simultaneously, he continued to act as a sounding-board for Metternich in his difficult negotiations with Napoleon; Gentz certainly was not the Foreign Minister’s confidant in all respects, but he was privy to most of the intricate diplomatic events of the season. It was increasingly clear to him and to most of the other dignitaries gathered in Prague--indeed, he wrote, it seemed obvious to everyone except Metternich and Emperor Franz--that Napoleon would not agree to peace negotiations, and so it proved. Perhaps, as his critics charged, Napoleon could not accept any peace that did not follow a glorious victory on his part; perhaps he did not believe that Austria would really break its alliance with him. Whatever the reason, Napoleon dragged his feet and tried to alter the preliminary terms, and finally even Metternich’s patience ran out. On July 30, he commissioned Gentz to draft Austria’s war declaration, and this Gentz did with apparent alacrity; “this monster’s head is absolutely deranged,” he wrote to Nesselrode, and whatever the range of his opinions on another war, the waiting in Prague had been so exhausting that like everyone else, he was ready to get it over with.³⁰²

As the year progressed, though, Gentz’s uneasiness toward the idea of a people’s war against Napoleon only grew. Not only had he come to see the nationalist activity being inspired by Stein and Arndt as a far greater long-term danger, he now recognized, too, that Napoleon’s rise to power had slammed the lid on the warfare between ultra-royalists and diehard Jacobins, which would break forth anew the moment he was gone. This was true not just for France but for

³⁰¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 274; Paul Reiff, *Friedrich Gentz*, 144.

³⁰² Karl Nesselrode, *Lettres et Papiers, 1760-1850*, V, 122.

Germany, given the violent nationalism he saw on display in the Prussian armies. “The revolutionary party are already sharpening their knives for their defrauded confederates. I have a deep suspicion that we shall have won, not for ourselves but for our worst enemies. A new war threatens, more grievous and bloody than the Napoleonic, and perhaps in the near future. And I fear that as far as this coming war is concerned we have destroyed our best ally.”³⁰³

Gentz did not really regard Napoleon as the “best ally” of Austria or the counter-revolutionary program in general, but he was deeply afraid of what would happen when the emperor’s restraining hand was removed. Also, like most educated men in Western and Central Europe, he was both fascinated and repelled by the prospect that Tsarist Russia might emerge from the war with the power to dictate peace for the whole continent. Gentz had never liked Russia. He had at times expressed a willingness to move there if it were the only power to keep up opposition to Napoleon, but he liked neither its cold climate nor what he saw as its essentially primitive society and government, in which he was not alone. Most Europeans who knew anything about Russia—“the colossus,” it was sometimes dubbed—saw it as an alien entity, a barbaric colossus with a veneer of civilization. The Napoleonic Wars were hardly the first time this empire had been involved in European conflicts, but its army was sweeping further west than ever before, and its numbers gave some indication of its potential power. Gentz had never wanted an utterly crushed France; on the contrary, it needed to remain strong to preserve the European equilibrium. Otherwise, the entire continent might find itself in thrall to Russia, a situation which seemed more and more likely with each passing day. Tsar Alexander’s designs of putting Count Bernadotte on the French throne once Napoleon was forced out were by now becoming clear to the highest Austrian circles, and when Gentz learned of it at year’s end, his

³⁰³ Metternich-Klinkowstrom, *Oesterreichs Theilnahme an den Befreiungskriegen*, 280-93.

fear of France and the German states becoming Russian satellites was so great that, as his letters reveal, he would have almost welcomed a Napoleonic resurgence against the Allies.³⁰⁴

Though startling, coming as these words did from a man who had once vowed to make league with the devil to get rid of Napoleon, it should be noted that Gentz's attitude in 1813 fell entirely within the mainstream of thought on this matter within the Allied coalition. Though obviously more than mistrustful of the French, none of the assorted powers were bent on unconditional surrender and, almost without exception, would have accepted a peace that left Napoleon as emperor of a reduced but still mighty France. His own intransigence would destroy this conciliatory offer by the spring of 1814, but the salient point is that Gentz's views mirrored those of not only Metternich but Alexander, Frederick William, Lord Castlereagh of Britain, and so many others. Moreover, while some viewing events at a distance considered his ardor for "the cause" to have cooled, this was by no means true of those who knew him more intimately--Humboldt, for instance. The truth seems to be that he had simply lost the enthusiasm of his youth and was now looking through the more cynical, experienced eyes of *Realpolitik*. In such a condition, hoping for Bonaparte's downfall but fearful of the consequences, Gentz was left as the Napoleonic Wars wound to a close.

At 1:00 a.m. on the morning of October 21st, a courier arrived at Gentz's residence in Prague with the news that the Coalition armies had emerged victorious at Leipzig. While the full details were not yet known, it soon became clear that the battle (later to be called "The Battle of the Nations") had been a crushing defeat for Napoleon. After three days of fighting, he had been forced to abandon the field in disorder and had suffered some 68,000 casualties, out of about 180,000 engaged. Allied casualties had been heavy as well—perhaps 50,000 out of a 300,000-

³⁰⁴ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 271. Indeed, in this letter Gentz went so far as to say he would like to see the coalition "buried."

man force, all told, and Sir George Jackson left a memorable account of the road to Leipzig being covered for miles with the dead and maimed.³⁰⁵ They could far better afford the loss, however, while Napoleon was faced with the collapse of his entire position east of the Rhine. He had no choice but to abandon the German heartland and the Confederation satellites, which collapsed as the Allied armies moved westward. Even before the year 1813 was out, it was possible to conclude that the Napoleonic Wars might finally, finally, be nearing an end.

Gentz at once shared his celebratory mood with the rest of Prague. He sent out bulletins to be printed in special editions of the *Prager Zeitung* that same morning and the next day organized the city's illumination and the holding of a *Te Deum* in the cathedral. However much the turns of Austrian foreign policy had forced him to moderate his earlier anti-Napoleonic positions, it is clear that he was ecstatic over the downfall of his foe. And, indeed, he can hardly be blamed for it. As he wrote some years later: "It was a wonderful moment for me. The object for which I had struggled for twenty years appeared to finally be at hand. Circumstances had made me one of the main organs which proclaimed this great and joyful news, and for me—as not for everyone—the fall of the empire and of the man who stood at its peak was a pure, completely unmarred triumph."³⁰⁶

The Battle of Leipzig marked the end not only of Napoleon's empire (though it took *le petit corporal* some time to admit it) but of a major phase of Gentz's life. The bulk of his energies since the 1790s, as he said, had been devoted to combating Napoleon and the other legacies of the French Revolution; but it was now becoming a question of what the European scene would look like following that struggle. Already by October 1813, he and Metternich had recognized and discussed the changing reality in the German states, as the energy released by the

³⁰⁵ Sir George Jackson, *The Bath Archives*, 314.

³⁰⁶ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 270.

War of Liberation, they feared, could set in motion a new wave of revolution.³⁰⁷ Neither they nor the other members of the Coalition had fought France for so long only to be stamping out the fires of Jacobinism all over again, and with Napoleon's final defeat and removal now imminent, restoring a stable international system became paramount. In December 1813 Gentz was summoned from Prague to Freiburg im Breisgau, where the Austrian court had set itself up, and joined a crowd of luminaries that included Francis I, Metternich, Hardenberg, Nesselrode, British and Russian envoys, and generals from all four major armies.

Such negotiations as occurred at this time were still mostly military in nature—the movement of troops through neutral Switzerland, for instance—but as Gentz recorded, there was already a good deal of jockeying for position among representatives of the different powers. On the one hand, he was dazzled by the bringing together in one place of so many distinguished persons, and the sparkling conversation to be had each day; on the other, it was really brought home to him how much divergence of opinion existed between the allies. The Vienna Congress was still some months away, but the preliminaries for it were already being laid.

In February 1814, Gentz was ordered to return to Vienna to keep an eye on the domestic situation and to manage the publication of the official announcements on the progress of the war, and there he was when the news came in April that Paris had been captured and that Napoleon had finally thrown in the towel and abdicated. Gentz did not record his thoughts on this occasion—or if he did, it has not survived—but it must have been a curious moment for him, even beyond his conflicting opinions on the utility of removing the French emperor. He would be fifty years old the following month, and almost exactly half his life had been spent wrestling first with the French Revolution, then with the Napoleonic phenomenon it had begotten. Now what?

³⁰⁷ Metternich-Klinkowstrom, *Oesterreichs Theilnahme*, 98-103, 248-62, 280.

Chapter 7

“My political career seems to be finished with these events,” Gentz recorded in his diary on May 2, 1814 (his fiftieth birthday), referencing Napoleon’s abdication the previous month and his removal to the Mediterranean island of Elba. As he admitted in his memoirs some years later, this statement was “a memorable piece of blindness.”³⁰⁸ His error was understandable; while his superiors had remained in the cockpit of political action, fighting the final campaigns against Napoleon and entering Paris in triumph, he had returned to Vienna in January and resumed his previous tasks—keeping up correspondence with Metternich and other dignitaries, dashing off memoranda when required, censoring the Austrian newspapers, and so on. His social life remained lively, with nearly every evening spent with one aristocrat or another—mostly native Austrians or some visiting Russians—or various foreign diplomats. His voice was being ignored in the halls of power, though, at least for now, as his talk of a peace settlement that left Napoleon on the throne was scorned by the Allies.

Thanks to the enormous quantity of first-hand accounts of the Congress of Vienna and to Gentz’s important role in it, we have a more complete picture of him as a person here than anywhere else. This is not entirely to his credit, as the image of a vain, decadent gossip that comes across in many biographies and histories of the era is also largely based on these accounts. Yet these sources also show a tireless worker who often stood up for important political principles, and whose slippery maneuverings through high society were critical in the backroom dealings where the real work of the Congress was done. During the hectic days of 1814-15, Gentz sometimes cut a ridiculous figure, but never an irrelevant one.

³⁰⁸ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 284.

The funk Gentz found himself in during the critical early months of 1814 was not entirely a result of his being excluded from the center of power politics at Allied headquarters (though it was that in part). What he had come to fear, recently, above all else--that the Allies, having embraced the tools of a “peoples’ war,” would end by also accepting the assumption of popular sovereignty--was seemingly borne out by reports that Tsar Alexander intended to let the French legislature draw up a constitution that Louis XVIII would have to abide by. This seemed to him nothing less than a vindication of the late unlamented Jacobin regime, by those who were supposed to be its enemies, and Gentz could find nothing to celebrate in such a “victory.” “Did I wage war on the Revolution for twenty-four years,” he fumed to Pilat, “in order that, finally, all its fundamental principles should be triumphantly enthroned and solemnly proclaimed by the greatest sovereigns and ministers?”³⁰⁹

In this mood, out of contact with Metternich and burdened with his mundane duties, Gentz passed the first half of the year, passing along political reports and taking what comfort he could in the springs at nearby Baden and his various social engagements. He was not involved, for example, with the Treaty of Paris, signed on May 30, which ended the state of war between France and the Allies. In an early indicator that vengeance would not be a major component of the post-war terrain, French borders were fixed according to their status in November 1792, the nation’s pre-war colonies were returned, and no indemnity or occupation force was imposed. This magnanimous spirit was due in large part to a collaboration between Metternich and British Prime Minister Lord Castlereagh, who were very different men but agreed that a lasting settlement ought to be based on realism and balance of power, rather than ideology and a “heroes vs. villains” sentiment. Such language was, of course, entirely pleasing to Gentz’s ear, as was the

³⁰⁹ *Briefe von Gentz an Pilat*, I, 136.

settlement overall, and for him it resurrected some hope that negotiations would henceforth be based on the eighteenth-century system he continued to favor. “A general reform of the European political system, guarantees for an eternal peace--in short, for the return of the age of gold,” these were what he wanted from future discussions. Indeed, it was what he had always wanted.³¹⁰

In the course of the Paris negotiations, Metternich had secured the commitment of the other powers to a more general conference at Vienna that autumn, intended not so much to deliberate aspects of the peace agreement as to simply ratify what he and other Allied statesmen had already settled behind the scenes. Given the aforementioned principles which were to guide that meeting, it was not surprising that Gentz, despite his absence from the preliminaries, would have a large part to play in it. Still, even he must have been somewhat astonished when, as his friend Karl Nesselrode informed him on September 23, a week before the formal opening of the Congress, Metternich, Castlereagh, Nesselrode, Hardenberg and Humboldt (representatives of the four main powers) had unanimously decided to make Gentz the chief of protocol for the upcoming conference.³¹¹ New to the world of European diplomacy, this post essentially meant that he was in charge of recording the minutes of the peace negotiations, and of composing for general publication summaries of the agreements reached therein. It required (as the Congress would show) a capacity for hard work, a knowledge of all the fine points of international law, constant contact and good relations with the many heads of state and their representatives, and (perhaps most important) an ability to find the right word or phrase to clinch an argument and

³¹⁰ *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 153-55.

³¹¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 288. Because Hardenberg, the chief minister for Prussia, was hard of hearing, Humboldt was usually present to assist him in negotiations.

placate warring parties.³¹² Although it involved a lot of behind-the-scenes work and only a very limited degree of true independence, and although, as events were to show, he would almost wish he had never received the appointment, to be given such a position by unanimous vote was perhaps Gentz's greatest personal triumph to that date.

Fifty years old at the time of the Vienna Congress, Friedrich Gentz was no longer quite the same would-be courtier he had once been. The countless balls, masquerades, salons, and other social meetings during the Congress he still found captivating—at least at first. He attended them less and less as time went on, however, and by the beginning of 1815 was writing in his diary, “Good God, how did I ever get in with this crowd?”³¹³ Nor was he capable of the same doctrinaire stand on principles as the writer of the *Historisches Journal* once had. Notions like “legitimacy” and “balance of power,” it increasingly seemed, were but a cover for the mighty to prey on the weak, and that was as true of Austria as anyone else. Had the Congress been devoted to the goals he considered truly important – “general reform of the European political system, guarantees for an eternal peace...the return of the age of gold,” he would have placed more faith in it, but there was nothing of “a highly elevated character.” “I enjoy the whole spectacle as though it were given for my own private entertainment,” he wrote.³¹⁴ His journal from the days of the Congress gives a number of details about the social events, but says very little about the political activities. When asked to contribute to a new patriotic journal, he replied that the editors

³¹² The importance of this last was on display even before the opening of the Congress, A September 1814 letter from Castlereagh, for instance, reads: “With respect to the expression ‘terminé entièrement et jusqu’à un parfait accord,’ I wish to be understood as desirous of making every suitable concession...for the purposes of unanimity, but that I cannot consent to be absolutely bound by a majority, and must reserve to myself to make such avowal of my dissent...” HHStA, St. K. Kongressakten, Kart. 1, (Fz. 1), 2.

³¹³ Gentz was periodically ill during this time. Despite a few instances of gout, his health had been rather good up to now and he had boasted in December 1813 of scaling low mountains in Swabia on foot en route to Freiburg, but he later recorded feeling “indisposed and ailing” on occasions from February 1814 onward. It does not seem to have affected his ability to take part in political or social affairs, but it might easily account for his gloomier temperament. *Tagebücher*, I, 279, 284.

³¹⁴ *Dépêches Inédites* I, 153-55.

had better find someone better able to believe to justice and objective morality, which he could no longer do. “Through a concurrence of circumstances I have become familiar with the substance of great affairs; the secret ways of politics...the defects, delusions, and vanities in virtually everything that from a distance seems meritorious or imposing; so much so, indeed, that I am no longer susceptible to illusion.”³¹⁵

He was also disgusted with the sordid personal affairs that accompanied the congress. In particular, Metternich’s infatuation with the pretty young Duchess Wilhelmine von Sagan (whom Gentz loathed and referred to once as a “wench”) continued, and for some time he was carrying on an active relationship with her; while the congress was in session, however, she parted ways with him and became a favorite of Tsar Alexander, whom Gentz described in his diary as “a magnet for women.” The Foreign Minister was dejected by this turn of events, and during their late-night personal conferences, Gentz was often forced to endure his superior’s constant complaints and moaning about how the duchess had deserted him.³¹⁶ More importantly, it further complicated a deteriorating relationship between Metternich and Alexander, until at one point the latter talked of challenging the former to a duel. At one time, perhaps, Gentz might have found all this titillating, but now he thought it by turns tiresome and frustrating, for it seemed to him that Metternich’s obsession with the duchess was distracting him from the objectives of the Congress. Never very close-mouthed, his complaints reached the ears of Austria’s guests, which did not make the work to be done go any smoother.

³¹⁵ *Briefe von Gentz an Pilat*, I, 123-24.

³¹⁶ This was not a new situation. While at the baths in June and July, Gentz had been joined by Metternich, his wife and children, and then by Duchess von Sagan. As one might expect, this was a very unstable situation, and as Gentz dryly recorded, “I often paid dearly for the honor of being his confidant and intermediary in this matter.” *Tagebücher*, I, 286.

Despite this melancholy, Gentz threw himself tirelessly into the business of peace negotiations; indeed, he probably worked harder than anyone else at Vienna during this time.³¹⁷ Normally he called on Metternich at nine or ten in the morning to discuss the day's business, then was occupied through the rest of the day and well into the night with official tasks or social calls as the situation required. As he later recounted, neither the congress as such nor the chief institution, the Committee of Eight, often met as a body. The occupations which had always taken up so much of his time—dinners, after-dinner conversations, social calls, etc.—and which on the surface seem rather frivolous, were in fact where much of the real business of peace happened. Although, as a rule, Gentz did not attend the public festivals and dances for which the Congress has become so famous, his many contacts, his glib tongue, and his talented pen made him a natural go-between for the numerous parties.³¹⁸ Many of the transactions he was involved in were rather trivial in nature, such as seeing to it that the Grand Duke of Baden received honorary command of an Austrian regiment, and for which he received some tidy rewards. Others, however, were considerably more important, touching on major policies the Congress was meant to address. Repeatedly he was asked by Castlereagh, Humboldt, Nesselrode, or another acquaintance to speak with Metternich about a certain matter, or commissioned by Metternich to hammer an issue out with one of them. It was in a sense the work of a courtier, but important work nonetheless. Besides, if Gentz was no longer much of a social butterfly, he was heavily involved in the more private affairs. He regularly hosted his own dinner parties at his apartment on the Seilergasse, which was often packed with guests. Gentz did not decide policy;

³¹⁷ Except, probably, for Metternich himself, who also had the rest of the Austrian government to watch over at the same time.

³¹⁸ Gentz did occasionally attend these festivals, though, such as an especially gala ball in early November. *Tagebücher*, I, 336. These appearances were few and far between, however, and seem to have been practically nonexistent toward the end of the Congress.

it was not his job to do so. But through his correspondence, private interviews, and informal gatherings, he was a vital intermediary for those who did have the final say on policy, and his networking was instrumental in holding the Congress together.

Those who knew Gentz were in no doubt about his performance. Karl Varnhagen von Ense, a young nobleman who was already an acquaintance of his, and who later edited and published his diaries, wrote that “As well-informed adviser and lucid expositor, he was of importance everywhere and to the persons of highest rank; the foremost statesmen associated with him on a plane of equality. At that time there could be no doubt who Gentz was.”³¹⁹ It is a statement open to qualification. Gentz was “of importance...to the persons of highest rank,” not himself one of them. Within the world of the Congress, he was always clearly an instrument for those of the innermost circle, not a member. Yet von Ense is largely correct. In a setting of multiple and contradictory policy proposals, on which the fate of entire nations depended, the absence of someone who could be adviser, fixer, and wordsmith simultaneously would have been fatal. In that respect, Gentz was well-nigh indispensable. And however cynical he might be about those he rubbed elbows with, he could hardly deny that the position he now enjoyed was sufficient to satisfy anyone’s ambition, especially that of a talented man of bourgeois origins in a society that prized nobility above all else. Was there any other son of a second- or even third-tier civil servant who could now write, as Gentz did that October, “Could not receive the Crown Prince of Bavaria, the King of Denmark, etc.”? One would like to think he at least took a moment to appreciate his triumph.³²⁰

It could not have been much more than a moment, though, for there was serious work to be done. The qualities which had won Gentz the good favor of his peers were on demand from

³¹⁹ Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, *Denkwürdigkeiten des eignen Lebens* (4 vols., Leipzig, 1843), III, 278.

³²⁰ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 325.

the very moment the Congress began that fall—before it, in fact. On September 30, the eve of the formal opening of the conference, there was a serious dispute between Comte Maurice de Talleyrand, leader of the French delegation, and the “Big Four,” as they were known—Austria, Britain, Prussia, and Russia. Talleyrand objected that the Big Four were trying to dominate the proceedings, at the expense of not only those who happened to find themselves on the losing side (i.e. France) but also the small fry present, such as minor participants like Portugal and total nonentities like the smaller German states, who were in effect being excluded from the major negotiations. Even moderate powers like Spain, Bavaria, or Denmark were frequently marginalized. All this was accurate enough, but for the Big Four to concede the point would be to delegitimize the entire Congress, and a defense of their arrangements was needed.

Gentz was called on to write a memorandum containing the official position of the Allied powers, and did so promptly. His response, delivered to Talleyrand on October 4, pointed out that the proceedings at Vienna were in strict accordance with the agreements reached in Paris, which had been very generous to France, even awarding her an equal place at the negotiating table, and which Talleyrand and the other French representatives had agreed to then. Hence, it was nonsensical to be complaining about non-representation now. Gentz’s response was, of course, highly pleasing to members of the Big Four delegations, but did little to satisfy Talleyrand, who continued to protest that the Austrians, British, Prussians, and Russians—especially the Russians, he seemed to suggest as time went on—were settling everything themselves and only letting everyone else know after the fact. This was not entirely true, but these powers had in fact agreed at Paris earlier in the year that the full Congress was to be a decorous fig leaf that would simply ratify what they themselves had already agreed on. Gentz was of course aware of this, and some of Talleyrand’s arguments did begin to strike a chord with

him, especially when he spoke of eschewing ideology and moral self-righteousness in favor of political realism. In the short term, though, he realized that Talleyrand's opposition and influence meant a general meeting of all the plenipotentiaries—a true “Congress” as we would understand it—was impossible now, as the French diplomat would turn the smaller powers against the Big Four, and would soon persuade its members to that effect.³²¹ A compromise was eventually worked out which placed the business of the Congress in the hands of the aforementioned Committee of Eight, giving a larger role to France and some of the secondary powers—Spain, Sweden, and Portugal—and the issue was effectively settled. In truth, though, regardless of how many powers were represented on the official councils, much of the work at the Congress would continue to be done informally, through private negotiations and back-room agreements. It may have been just as well, given the myriad of issues that plagued the representatives in the coming months.

Perhaps no single issue created as much of a headache for Gentz (and Metternich, and Talleyrand, and the many delegations) as did Saxony. The full background of the Saxony debate, which began in earnest by mid-October, can be left to more general histories of the Congress, but in short, that kingdom had maintained its alliance with Napoleon longer than any other German state, even during the Battle of Leipzig, and at Vienna found its very existence in danger as a result. Its actions were anathema to the community of German nationalists, who viewed it as a traitor that must suffer accordingly; this might not have mattered so much, except that the Prussian delegation (and its connections back in Berlin) were making this charge as well, either from genuine anger or to justify their desire to expand their territory or both. In any case,

³²¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 313-15; Charles Maurice, Prince de Talleyrand, *Correspondance Inédite du Prince de Talleyrand et du Roi Louis XVIII, pendant le Congrès de Vienne*, M.G. Pallain ed. (Paris: E. Plon et Cie, 1881), 28-34.

Frederick William, Humboldt, and others were demanding that Saxony pay for its sins by being entirely absorbed into the Prussian state. Nor were they an isolated party, for the Saxon issue was closely linked to the fate of Poland. Russian troops were in control of most of the once-independent country, and Tsar Alexander fully intended to make that control permanent, by making Poland a kingdom once more, under his “protection.” This would include much of the Polish territory previously annexed by Prussia, so to mollify Berlin, Alexander let it be known he fully supported the proposed takeover of Saxony. Some of this agenda had already become clear during the negotiations at Paris, but it had been assumed by Metternich and others that Prussia and Russia could be persuaded to give way. During the opening stages of the Congress, though, Alexander, as well as Friedrich Wilhelm and his ministers, refused to be dissuaded. Poland and Saxony were theirs, full stop.³²²

Gentz had predicted as far back as June that the Poland-Saxony question would become the major sticking-point of the Congress; but neither his foresight nor anyone else’s could prevent it from blowing up during the autumn.³²³ From first to last during the assemblage, he was a staunch and outspoken opponent of the Prusso-Russian deal, which he found infuriating from every perspective. Any dissolution of a sovereign state (regardless of whether or not it had fought for Napoleon--and as he often pointed out, Saxony was hardly the guiltiest party in that) and removal of its legitimate ruler, he regarded as an illegal and unjust act. For the constant insinuations that to be a good German was to be a Prussian patriot and supporter of all its endeavors, meanwhile, he had nothing but contempt. “Prussia,” he later wrote, “brought to the

³²² It is only fair to note that the wrangling over Saxony and Poland was not just a matter of power politics. Austria, Prussia, and Russia all at times expressed interest, for example, in preserving or building up Polish cultural institutions and allowing the Poles some degree of autonomy, while in the case of Saxony, even leading Prussians like Hardenberg acknowledged the existence of a Saxon identity and the need to respect it. See Brian Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 284-91.

³²³ *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 79-84.

Congress only the one extravagant wish to extend her possessions at the expense of all, and without the slightest regard for justice or decency.” Their designs on Saxony, it seemed clear to him, was part of a long-term project to become the supreme power in Germany by “sooner or later {acquiring} most of north Germany {and} put Austria out of action.” As for Poland, he had never ceased to have some private sympathies for its reestablishment as an independent state, but it seemed clear to him (and to nearly everyone else) that this would be no independent state, but a satellite that would merely expand Russia west to the Vistula--and possibly further. For if Russia delivered Saxony to Prussia, it would make the Hohenzollerns either the allies or the servants of the Romanovs, who in that case might well have all of northern Germany under their thumb. For all these reasons, the Saxony-Poland deal being demanded by Prussia’s representatives and by Alexander was utterly unacceptable. “I would not yield to Russia a single farm in Galicia,” he had written to Metternich back in March, “and would do my utmost to take Warsaw from her.”³²⁴ Beyond that, he was outraged by the high-handed form of diplomacy being practiced by Alexander, who had loudly proclaimed Saxony’s annexation a fitting punishment for its alliance with Napoleon (overlooking his own status as a French ally only three years before), and which Gentz saw as nothing but a pretext for the land grab under way. “The language of justice and truth,” he wrote exasperatedly in his diary, “is not one Russia understands.”³²⁵

As the Saxony issue took shape, and its implications became clearer to everyone, Gentz grew ever more adamant on the necessity of preserving Saxon independence. Under pressure from Castlereagh and others (who wanted a quick resolution to placate Berlin and St. Petersburg), he was willing to support the kingdom’s temporary occupation by Prussian troops,

³²⁴ Metternich-Klinkowstrom, *Österreichs Theilnahme an den Befreiungskriegen*, 280.

³²⁵ Gentz, *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 120.

but nothing more. Frustrated that he could get no commitment from Metternich, who seemed out to sea over his souring love affair with Wilhelmine von Sagan, Gentz cornered his superior on October 12 and harangued him over the issue. If Austria did not defend Saxony, he stormed, then the Congress was nothing but a veneer for the use of force, and Napoleon (or what he stood for) had won after all. This appeared to put some steel into Metternich, and Gentz, elated, wrote in his diary that the day was “one of the most crucial in the history of my public life; it will perhaps be the finest of my life.” This was premature, though, for the Foreign Minister remained less than fully committed to the matter, and within a few days seemed once more on the verge of capitulating to Prussian demands. Gentz was frustrated to no end. All he could do, it seemed, was rant in private about Metternich’s love affair “which appears to interest him more even than the affairs of the world.”³²⁶

His opposition to the growing Berlin-Moscow axis, together with his personal commitment to balances of powers and practical solutions, and his failure to get satisfaction from Metternich, led to warmer and warmer relations with Talleyrand. Only a few weeks after drafting the Big Four’s response to the French representative, Gentz was regularly calling on and dining with Talleyrand—as he did with members of the other powers, to be sure; but soon enough the Austrian police were commenting on the frequency of his visits. The suspicion was that Talleyrand was trying to make the publicist his man inside the congress, and no doubt he did try, flattering Gentz with many gifts and even offering to find him a position in the new French government. But really, it was unnecessary, for the two men shared much common ground

³²⁶ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 318-21. It was an indication of just how entwined the political and the personal (i.e. the sexual) were at the Congress that Alexander eventually sent Metternich an anonymous note offering him £100,000 and the return of Duchess de Sagan as a mistress, if he would drop all objections to the Polish issue. (Metternich declined.) The duchess was soon dropped by Alexander, who rarely kept one mistress for very long, picked up by Lord Castlereagh’s brother, reconciled with Metternich, and died in 1839.

before the congress opened, and needed only to meet to recognize a certain harmony. When Talleyrand wrote sarcastically in a memorandum to the Powers, “Prussia is the great danger...she wants Luxemburg; if she does not get Mainz all will be lost, she says; if she does not get Saxony she will enjoy no security,” Gentz of course approved and passed these arguments on to Metternich, while his opposition to German unification was in turn brought up by Talleyrand when communicating to Louis XVIII.³²⁷ Besides, Talleyrand wanted what Gentz wanted—a strong France to counterbalance Russia and a Germany not entirely dominated by Prussia.

In the meantime, with the great powers falling out with each other, it was clear to Gentz that a full Congress could not be convened as originally planned; the embarrassment would be too great. Shortly before the scheduled opening date of November 1, he met with Humboldt, Hardenberg, and Nesselrode and convinced them to cancel it, ensuring that the Saxony-Poland controversy would remain semi-private. “I killed the idea of a Congress,” he later wrote in his diary, referring to the broader, more inclusive option. From then on, the Congress would consist mainly of small backroom meetings and personal interviews, with larger assemblies even more of a formality.³²⁸

The issue of Saxony (as well as Poland) dragged on throughout the winter of 1814-15. Austria, backed by Britain and France, initially proposed, in early December, that Prussia receive only a fifth of Saxony, but as Gentz recorded, “all the Prussians and all their supporters cried murder.”³²⁹ The Russians reacted by putting forth on the 30th an official proposal that the Hohenzollerns annex *all* of Saxony, while all or most of Poland fell under Russian sovereignty.

³²⁷ Talleyrand, *Mémoires*, II, 280. See also Golo Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 225.

³²⁸ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 327.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

This was no better; the major parties at Vienna rang in the New Year with a cloud over their heads, and there was a real danger for a time that the Congress would fall apart entirely over the matter. Gentz's own spirits had sunk so low by now that for a time he actively welcomed this prospect, advising Metternich to wash Austrian hands of the whole business and dissolve the Congress before an open rupture took place. Fortunately, the instinctive recoil from the prospect of a new war after years of bloodshed prevented relations from deteriorating to the point of no return, and a compromise of sorts was eventually reached. Saxony would have to surrender about two-fifths of its territory (and a comparable part of its population) but would keep its independent status; Prussia would meanwhile be confirmed as possessor of Westphalia and the Rhineland in the west and of the Polish province of Posen in the east.³³⁰ This was unacceptable to most of the Prussian delegation—they would be content with nothing less than total annexation—but Austria, France, and England had signed a treaty in early January pledging mutual support against Prussia, and when Russia, receiving the bulk of Poland (minus Posen and Galicia) in the same arrangement, gave its support to the plan, Berlin was forced to give in.

The fiasco (from the Prussian point of view) over Saxony made Gentz, for a time, one of the most hated men in his native land. The general opinion in Berlin was that he was a turncoat and backstabber, motivated chiefly by hope of pecuniary gain (the gift of 24,000 gulden to Gentz from a grateful Louis XVIII via Talleyrand may not have had the best timing). Wilhelm von Humboldt's wife Karoline wrote him to complain of Gentz's "positively satanic delight" in always blaming and trying to constrain Prussia, and added that "the most sacred cause to inspire our era has never really touched him."³³¹ The break with Baron vom Stein, who after the debacle

³³⁰ Gentz had outlined such a possible settlement as this to the Wallachian *hospodar* back in September. See *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 100.

³³¹ Anna von Sydow, *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, IV, 423-26.

at Jena had been at such pains to resurrect the Prussian state, and had then been on such good terms with his former countryman, was now complete and very personal: Gentz, he said, possessed a “worm-eaten brain and scorched heart.” Friedrich Schlegel, another long-time acquaintance, fumed that he was a “contemptible...depraved...half-French diplomat,” for whom “everything is secondary to his *hatred for the people*.” Even his brother publicly disowned him.³³²

Gentz was far from the only man castigated for having denied the Prussians what was “rightfully theirs”; everyone at the Congress, even the Prussian representatives themselves, were blamed. A report later circulated that a mob in Berlin had broken the windows of Hardenberg’s own house in protest.³³³ The fact that this former Prussian had worked so hard for the apparent betrayal of his one-time friends and principles, though, did cause a particular amount of ill-will to be thrown his way. It was said that he was in the employ of Talleyrand; that his services were for sale to the highest bidder; or that his own perfidious nature couldn’t help stabbing the victors in the back. According to the Austrian secret police, taking the temperature of public opinion, Gentz was believed to be “a spy for all the powers at the same time.”³³⁴

While the denunciations from friends and family alike might have stung a bit, Gentz was generally unconcerned for what his former countrymen said of him. Putting aside the fact that it was Vienna, not Berlin, which buttered his bread now, and the oft-remarked inability of Prussia

³³² Stein, *Briefwechsel*, V, 224; Varnhagen, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, III, 315. The irony of this settlement, of course, would only become evident in subsequent decades, especially after Gentz’s own death. By receiving in compensation most of the Rhine valley, a large exclave of strategic and economic importance, Prussia was left with a powerful incentive to overwhelm the intervening portions of northern Germany, to the point of actual annexation. It was the realization of this aim in the 1860s that would bring about the fulfillment of the most zealous Prussian patriots’ dream—to the long-term detriment of Austria. As Humboldt predicted in a letter to his wife, “With the first war that comes, Prussia will fill in the gaps.”

³³³ Niels Rosenkrantz, *Journal du Congrès de Vienne, 1814-1815* (Copenhagen: Georg Nørregård, 1953), 181.

³³⁴ Franz Rühl, *Briefe und Aktenstücke*, I, 371.

to see that its interests and German interests were not synonymous, he had long since determined to look at affairs from a European standpoint, not limited by the interests of any one state. He repeatedly asserted in his correspondence and publications, then and later, that it was not about whether a particular nation did well for itself at the Congress, it was about what was to the benefit of Europe as a whole. (That this often coincided with what was to the benefit of Austria, of course, was neither here nor there.) Having little more than scorn for the Congress anyway, he felt free to do as he saw fit and disregard those who cried foul afterwards.

This extended as well to the matter of how the German lands as a whole would be organized in the peace to come. Gentz was not responsible or directly involved in the decisions that resulted in the formation of the German Confederation, as active a part as he would play in defending it afterward. His diary records a number of meetings with the rulers of a number of principalities, large and small, and it is likely that his advice or help was sought by some of them regarding the new political arrangements; but there are few specific details in this regard.³³⁵ However, the Confederation did resemble in some aspects his 1809 proposal for a semi-centralized German state. There would be a national Diet, with some oversight powers, and while the member states retained most of the powers of full sovereignty (including their own armies), there was at least the potential for a truly federal structure to evolve.³³⁶

Whether he still fully supported this plan, though, is open to question. Despite his long-standing support for at least a form of German cultural nationalism--perhaps German cultural self-awareness would be a better way to put it--at no point had he wished to see Germany

³³⁵ As one instance, he records in early 1815 the receipt of a thousand *Gulden* for obtaining some (unspecified) favors on behalf of Lübeck in the wording of the Final Act. *Tagebücher*, I, 359.

³³⁶ Humboldt was also an important guiding hand in the project, doing much of the initial drafting of the future Confederation, its structures, and purpose. Gentz had looked over the draft in either December 1813 or January 1814 and made comments on it, as had Stein and Hardenberg. Albert Leitzmann et al., eds., *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, XI, 113-16.

coalesce into a unified and independent state, and given the trend of his ideas around 1814, it makes sense that he would wish institutions like the Diet kept as weak as possible. In 1815, shortly after the Congress came to an end, Gentz published an article defending the return of Italy, briefly united into a kingdom under Napoleon, to a collection of small independent states, reasoning that in terms of regional culture and political institutions, such entities as Piedmont-Sardinia, Naples, and Venice were miles apart, whatever common identity they might all have as Italians. Or, as Metternich put it, Italy was a geographical expression only.³³⁷ If his arguments in opposition to the Italian nationalists may be applied north of the Alps as well, he believed that the extreme cultural diversity within Germany, and the general absence of any unified rule of the “country” in the past, among other factors, gravitated against any attempt to make it into a nation-state.³³⁸

There was that question to deal with, as well as wrapping up the Saxony issue, and negotiating all the other territorial boundaries, and the rights of the free cities, and matters of compensation for all the many nobles and principalities on the losing side of the arrangements, and ecclesiastical reorganization—and all this was just in Germany; there were also a bevy of difficulties surrounding Italian affairs, the Low Countries, and much else. Gentz was not directly involved in all of these, but as chief of protocol, most of them did cross his desk on occasion, and so it is no wonder if he was fairly exhausted toward the end.

One notable (and altogether positive) addition to the German constitution to which Gentz contributed, meanwhile, was the question of Jewish rights. This was, relatively speaking, a minor

³³⁷ Gentz, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, VII, 232-43. Gentz’s dislike for nationalist expressions at this stage is not to be doubted, regarding Italy or elsewhere, but it was also true that the postwar settlement left Austria in a much stronger position south of the Alps.

³³⁸ At least some German nationalists of the mid-19th century were in a sort of backhanded agreement with Gentz on this, complaining that the Confederation gravitated against any attempt to form a true nation-state in Germany.

issue in the hammering out of the constitution, but it was a contentious one. Not only did Jewish legislation vary from state to state, as might be expected, but it had been thoroughly muddled by the years of French (and Enlightened) domination, with many (but not all) of the pre-war discriminatory laws repealed in many (but not all) German states. Now that Napoleonic rule was over, there was a real danger that all these gains would be reversed.

Interestingly enough, the stances of the various German states did not line up in the way one might expect. Representatives of those polities which had been more liberal and progressive under Napoleon—Bavaria, Frankfurt, Hamburg—were most outspoken in their desire for a return to enforced inequality for the Jews. One source reported that the Bavarian delegate to the German committee openly laughed when the question of “Jewish rights” was raised.³³⁹ Prussia and Austria, on the other hand, the two states rapidly coming to be identified with conservatism and reaction, took a different tack. Not only Gentz but Metternich, as well as Humboldt and Hardenberg on the Prussian side, were staunchly in support of German Jews, and were instrumental in inserting into the constitution an article that preserved all the rights they had previously been granted by law in the different states. This provision was not always honored in practice after 1815—a few areas, like the Hanseatic cities in the north, actually expelled their Jews soon afterward, in clear defiance of the constitution—but it was nonetheless an important precedent for the discussion of human rights at such international conferences.³⁴⁰ Gentz himself viewed the article as a significant accomplishment; while far from perfect, it was a definite

³³⁹ David King, *Vienna, 1814: How the Conquerors of Napoleon Made Love, War, and Peace at the Congress of Vienna* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009), 273.

³⁴⁰ This is not to say, of course, that Prussia or Austria embraced anything like a “pro-Jewish” policy. When Prussia took control of the Rhineland, many of the legal rights extended to Jewish residents under Napoleon were quickly canceled, and those employed in the civil service and other professions were fired. See also Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 560.

advancement over the pre-Napoleonic situation. He was also involved, albeit very indirectly, in the negotiations that led to the inclusion of language condemning the international slave trade.³⁴¹

Why Gentz took a pro-Jewish stance has never been established. His critics suggested that he took money from the community's representatives and wealthy individuals, most notably the Rothschild family, in return for their support, and he certainly did do that—his diary records various gifts, cash and otherwise, to the tune of over 3,000 ducats, gifts which Metternich and the others did not accept.³⁴² Loans from the Rothschilds, moreover, would provide an important source of income for him from this time on. But then, as has already been established, Gentz took presents from everybody. Moreover, while he was not above making certain anti-Semitic jokes and remarks, he had always been friendly with Jewish individuals, so much so that he was occasionally suspected of being part-Jewish himself, then and later: the future British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, once remarked that Gentz, not certain mid-century radicals, represented the true tendency of Jewish social thought.³⁴³ Gentz did not write much about the “Jewish Question,” so it is hard to say what his own position was, or how it developed. The best one can do, perhaps, is point to his upbringing in Berlin, in an educated middle-class stratum that certainly included a number of Jews, such as Moses Mendelssohn; and, having attained his position by sheer merit in the face of the old society of orders, he felt a natural respect for wealthier Jews, like the Rothschilds, who had done the same. Possibly, given this aspect of his

³⁴¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 352. Gentz unfortunately gives no details of his thoughts on the slave trade, or what his exact involvement in the discussion was; he only notes that he spent two-and-a-half hours preparing a statement on it in January. Some letters by Castlereagh suggest a communication between the two, however.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 371.

³⁴³ Benjamin Disraeli, *Lord George Bentinck: A Political Biography* (London, 1905), 325.

upbringing, serious anti-Jewish bigotry simply was not an issue for him—but again, this is only speculation.³⁴⁴

For a man who seemingly had his finger on the pulse of the action in Vienna, Gentz was among the last to know of Napoleon's escape from Elba. The dispatch containing the bombshell reached Metternich around seven in the morning of March 7, he was in consultation with Emperor Francis by eight and met with the Tsar and the Prussian king an hour later, all of whom at once declared their refusal to treat with Napoleon, and most of the Allied leaders had convened and agreed on a swift military response before noon; yet Gentz did not learn of it until that afternoon when, returning from the bathhouse, he was informed by Humboldt. He had had his usual morning conference with Metternich, who said not a word about it. Partly this was because the prince and others wished to delay the news becoming public and thus reduce the chances of a panic; but the decision to keep him in the dark suggests that he was, for all the esteem in which he was held, still not trusted to hold his tongue.

When jotting down the day's events in his diary, Gentz merely noted, "Humboldt announced to me the news of Bonaparte's departure from the Island of Elba."³⁴⁵ That was all. For all his years of opposition to the "Corsican ogre," and perhaps some momentary fears for his own safety, he was not viscerally horrified as the news from France unfolded—that Napoleon had landed on the coast, that the armies sent to capture him had embraced him, that he had entered Paris in triumph while Louis XVIII once more fled into exile. Though at times in

³⁴⁴ On the other hand, Gentz could be tolerant, even approving, of the anti-Jewish sentiment of others. He recorded reading "with exceptional pleasure" an 1803 pamphlet entitled "Against the Jews," published by Karl Wilhelm Grattenauer, a lawyer in Berlin. Among other things, Grattenauer ridiculed upper-class Jews who took part in salon culture, remarking that the young women among them were utterly lacking in charm and proper femininity. This was a direct attack upon the project of integrating Jews into mainstream Christian culture that many enlightened Germans, especially those from Gentz's native Berlin Huguenot circle, had been pursuing. See Spiel, *Fanny von Arnstein*, 184.

³⁴⁵ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 363.

friendly communication with the latter, he had never been enamored with Louis, and had long since made plain his desire to see Louis-Philippe on the throne, frequently commenting that the senior Bourbon line was all played out.³⁴⁶ Nor was he especially pleased that the Allies had decided on war in the space of a morning, rather than take time to deliberate on their options—a strange reaction from a man who a decade ago had castigated everyone in sight for not acting more promptly to stop Napoleon. As he saw it, Louis XVIII was an unpopular figure, and now that the French had their beloved emperor back, there was a chance that they and Napoleon might be willing to leave well enough alone, agree to abide by the terms of the agreements being developed in Vienna, and work within the international system of powers. It might even be that Austria and Britain would find in a chastened Napoleon a useful ally against further Russian encroachment. So Gentz speculated, at any rate, and put to Metternich a hastily written memorandum to this effect. But the minister turned it down flat, and he quickly realized that international opinion and the press of events were against him.³⁴⁷ Austria as a whole might not be eager to jump into a new war, especially given its potential for upsetting the hard-won peace arrangements, but both Francis and Metternich seemed resolved to put an end to these disturbances. The Allied leaders would not even meet with the new envoys hastily sent by Napoleon, and with the emperor soon lurching toward a preemptive invasion of Belgium, there was no chance of reconciliation. After seeing a highly denunciatory draft announcement, sketched by Talleyrand (who was rather unsettled at seeing the emperor he had betrayed back on the French throne, the more so since his properties in France were on the point of being confiscated in retaliation), that described Napoleon as a “wild beast,” Gentz wrote a more

³⁴⁶ Gentz was far from alone in this. Metternich and other ministers regarded Louis XVIII's hasty flight from France rather cynically, and even Tsar Alexander expressed his openness to a regency for Napoleon's young son.

³⁴⁷ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 364-65.

moderate document for the Allies to sign; whereas Talleyrand had called his former sovereign a “bandit” and “brigand,” Gentz merely stated that Napoleon had placed himself “outside the law” and thus was subject to “public vengeance.” This was duly adopted, and the Powers were committed to war once again.³⁴⁸

With the Allied leaders quickly departing for their capitals and armies, and turning their attention to a renewed war against Napoleon, the business of the Congress rapidly wound down—the business of negotiating, that is; it remained to put all the agreements and decisions into an actual written document. After drafting the declaration that branded Napoleon an outlaw, Gentz gave all his attention to this task. With the assistance of the French and British representatives, the Duke of Dalberg and Lord Clancarty respectively, and twenty-six secretaries, Gentz pored over the minutes and resolutions from eight months of negotiations and committee meetings, combining them into a single treaty that would cover all the points at issue (in the course of which it grew to 121 articles) and yet be coherent enough for publication. They were all on the clock, as it were; it had been decided that the treaty should be completed and signed before Napoleon had time to assemble another army and give battle. Otherwise, if he were to achieve an early victory, it might be delegitimized in the eyes of the public before it ever had a chance to appear. In this same spirit, Gentz dubbed the complete treaty the “Final Act”; it represented, he said, “the final act of the victorious coalition against Napoleon.”³⁴⁹

On the morning of June 19—only hours after the conclusion of the Battle of Waterloo, though no one in Vienna knew it yet—Gentz and his secretaries completed the transcription of

³⁴⁸ Rosenkrantz, *Journal du Congrès de Vienne*, 184. The declaration itself came only after some debate. Metternich had initially objected that whatever Napoleon’s character and status as a threat, he was, after all, the son-in-law of Emperor Francis and perhaps ought not be treated in such a fashion. But he underestimated his allies’ violent feelings toward the French conqueror and in the end assented to the phrasing.

³⁴⁹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 385; also *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 166-67.

the final treaty, and over the course of three hours that evening, the sovereigns and/or representatives of the various minor powers put their signatures to the document. The Congress of Vienna was over. It was not quite wrapped up: there was now the fallout from the Hundred Days to attend to. Once Napoleon abdicated a second time, and was removed once and for all from the political arena, a second peace negotiation was assembled later that year at Paris, and this time Gentz did attend in person, making his first and only visit to that city. He made the most of it, socially speaking, attending numerous receptions, balls, and private dinner parties (and bordellos) and purchasing the best the Parisian vendors had to offer. Much as he enjoyed himself, though, work came first, and he helped Metternich and the rest cobble out yet another peace treaty with France. It was harsher than he would have liked, saddling the French with an Allied occupation force under the Duke of Wellington, but in the end, he was grateful that it was no worse--far better, indeed, than what the Prussians would have liked to impose. "*Finita la commedia,*" he wrote in his diary in November 1815, on his last night in Paris, offering his last personal epitaph for the whole affair.³⁵⁰

The conclusion of events at Vienna, and then Paris, brought to a close more than a decade of struggle. On a personal level, the Congress had been a great success for Gentz. Not only had he been able to enjoy monarchs and ministers from across Europe coming to his door to seek his favor in solving their problems, it had also been highly lucrative. During the year 1814 alone, the monetary rewards from Talleyrand, Castlereagh, and others had totaled some 48,000 florins, and the next six months brought even more commissions. He could travel to and from Paris in style, attended by many servants and multiple carriages, and in the spring of 1815 he purchased a

³⁵⁰ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 433.

spacious villa in the country just northwest of Vienna, where he would reside until his death. He had reason, then, to be satisfied with his own part in the Congress.³⁵¹

Despite this personal success, Gentz's recent fatalism regarding the Congress itself had not abated, and he felt his work over the past months to be largely a failure: "I sensed as never before the futility of human endeavor, the failings of men who hold the fate of the world in their hands...The fine-sounding nonsense of these gentlemen enveloped my mind in a fog of unreality."³⁵² Partly this stemmed from his unhappiness that the balance of power he had pursued for so long had not come to fruition; partly it was a psychological letdown, after many years of what he considered a battle of good and evil, to be consumed by so much haggling. In any case, historians have been kinder to the settlement he helped craft. The Peace of Vienna was not perfect, of course, and one can argue that some of its provisions—creating an enlarged but divided Prussia, for example—helped store up future trouble. It amounted to a mixed bag for Austria, whose influence in Italy was strengthened but which nonetheless was left with an unstable position elsewhere; in the German states, for example, where its apparent strength as leader of the German Confederation would be gradually undermined by Prussia. It did, however, prevent a general European war for the next century, and might have done so far longer but for the jettisoning of certain elements. And while the system of periodic, lesser Congresses envisioned by Gentz and Metternich would not last long after 1815 (as we will see), it did become a basis for international conferences from the late nineteenth century forward.

Probably it was evident to Gentz by this point, however, that his political career had not come to a close. Jotting down far-reaching international agreements was one thing; holding to

³⁵¹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I 344.

³⁵² *Ibid*, 344.

them in the changing world of nineteenth-century Europe was quite another. The work of making the Restoration stick would indeed inaugurate a new phase of his life.

Chapter 8

Because the period 1815-30 was characterized by an international system that emphasized order and frowned on political liberty, a system put in place by conservatives and reactionaries, it would be natural to summarize the Restoration as a time in which the established rulers were in the ascendant, and individual voices were silenced. Such a description would have been a great surprise to Gentz, as to Metternich and other representatives of that ruling class. They knew very well how tenuous their achievement at Vienna was, and how easy it would be for the forces of revolution to assert themselves once more. The Congress just concluded did not mark the end of a chapter--the conclusion of the era of Revolution and Napoleon--to them, but rather a continuation of the ongoing struggle against the spirit that had called that era into being. This struggle would consume the next decade of Gentz's career, force him to again reexamine his political and philosophical positions, and help cement his place in history as one of the architects of German conservatism.

In the period immediately following the conclusion of affairs at Vienna and Napoleon's final defeat, Gentz's main desire was to preserve a sort of equilibrium in Europe, preventing the reappearance of either revolution or reaction. Indeed, for a time he seemed more zealous to avert the latter, and not without reason. The return of the Bourbons to France had re-opened many old wounds; while Louis XVIII himself was willing to leave much of the Revolution's work in place, a number of his supporters had old scores to settle. They had been persecuted, chased from their homes, seen the France of their youth twisted into something barely recognizable, and now they intended to let their erstwhile tormentors know the shoe was indeed on the other foot. In 1815-16, there was a "White Terror" in many parts of the kingdom, and the reactionary "ultras," as

they were known, were urging Louis XVIII to scrap many of the administrative reforms and social alterations coming out of the Revolution, even to the point of forcibly confiscating land that had been transferred from the nobility or the Church a generation earlier.³⁵³

At least in terms of policy, these efforts bore little fruit while Louis lived; nonetheless, Gentz was disgusted. “No color is black enough to portray the system and the views of this party {the ultras},” he wrote to his *hospodar* correspondent in Wallachia. “It longs for the absolute counterrevolution, the annihilation of everything that does not appear compatible with the old regime in its full extent...Those who in 1814 thought they would be able to re-establish the old regime, have done France as much harm as Robespierre and Bonaparte.”³⁵⁴ In a similar vein, he commented to his friend Johann von Wessenberg that “scarcely a day passes that I am not outraged by the miserable twaddle of petrified or half-petrified purists; these people have still no other fear than that the king of France may rule too *mildly*. *Our* views are completely strange to them.”³⁵⁵ Why Gentz was so “outraged,” he does not explain. He had never been an opponent of every action taken by the Revolutionary regime, of course; certain of its reforms he considered beneficial, and this likely was part of the reason for his dismay and anger. But his reference to “no other fear” on the part of the ultras may suggest what he thought they should really be afraid of: that too strenuous an attempt to turn back the clock would alienate the population and lead to further revolution and instability. For he had no faith that the reactionaries could succeed in their designs; “the nature of things,” he wrote to the *hospodar*, “is more powerful than men...Absolute

³⁵³ For further information on the White Terror, see Gwynn Lewis, “The White Terror of 1815 in the Department of the Gard: Counter-Revolution, Continuity and the Individual,” *Past and Present* 58 (Feb. 1972), 108-135.

³⁵⁴ *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 187.

³⁵⁵ Fournier, *Gentz und Wessenberg*, 88-89.

power, once it has been totally overturned, will never raise itself again. The old Bourbons cannot and should not rule any more.”³⁵⁶

The worst feature of the post-Vienna political arrangement, in Gentz’s opinion, was the turn toward reaction at the expense of practicality. The French *ultras* were one manifestation of this; another was the formation of the Holy Alliance among the eastern powers. This was largely the brainchild of Tsar Alexander, who had become something of a Christian mystic since the campaign of 1812. While this new religious spirit did little to keep him from taking and discarding mistresses, it did instill him with the belief that it was the duty of European rulers to do all in their power to restore the place of Christianity. Indeed, Alexander probably went farther than anyone else, at least for a time, in trying to enact the famed “alliance of throne and altar.” On one occasion in 1815, near the end of the Vienna Congress, he had invited Metternich to a private supper in which a place was set at the table for an empty chair; at the diplomat’s query, the tsar told him that the chair was for Jesus.³⁵⁷ It was in this frame of mind that Alexander developed the idea of the Holy Alliance, whose purpose, as he explained in his deliberately-titled “Declaration of the Rights of God,” was to preemptively stop the spread of atheistic, revolutionary doctrine by suppressing liberal and nationalist organizations, both at home and abroad—if necessary by violating the sovereignty of other nations. Despite some misgivings in Berlin and Vienna, both Frederick William III and Francis I signed the Alliance with Alexander in September 1815.

The response from the international diplomatic community was mixed at best. Though he had not strongly opposed Austrian accession to the league, Metternich naturally scorned any attempts to mix spirituality with politics, writing in his diary: “Abstract ideas count for very

³⁵⁶ *Dépêches Inédites*, I, 188.

³⁵⁷ Michel Missoffe, *Metternich, 1773-1859* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1959), 227.

little. We...[must] look for those factors that may save us from becoming prisoners of illusions about the real world.” Castlereagh openly ridiculed the whole project as “sublime mysticism and nonsense.” Even Pope Pius VII, who some might have supposed more favorable to it, refused to have any part of an inter-confessional union, remarking caustically that the Catholic Church “needed no new interpretation of [Christian truth].”³⁵⁸ As for Gentz, he too was prevented by his position from being openly critical of the Alliance, and even had to publish a few pieces supportive of it, but he viewed it, not surprisingly, as one of the worst pieces of hokum to emerge from the Congress. “A monument to human and princely eccentricity,” he dubbed it in his diary.³⁵⁹

Far more important to him than vague professions of Christian unity were the concrete steps to be taken in repelling further revolutionary disorder, from either side of the spectrum. While such categorizations as “liberal” and “conservative,” “Left” and “Right” had not yet come into common use, the conceptual division that lay behind them was already real enough. At stake, essentially, was the meaning and significance of the French Revolution, and whether that was an event to be repeated or avoided. This simple definition, though, glosses over a great many complicating questions, concerning the best response to the Revolution, how much of it could be safely accepted or rejected, and much else. These difficult issues had been at the center of the Napoleonic Wars, and they lay behind much of the strife that broke out in the first years of the Restoration. It was to this new ideological conflict that Gentz now turned his attention; for as he was aware, much of the battle would be fought in the public sphere, and especially in the realm of arts and culture.

³⁵⁸ Metternich, *Nachgelassene Papiere*, I, 214-16.

³⁵⁹ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, II, 83. See also Owen Chadwick, *The Popes and European Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 537.

In Germany the problem was particularly thorny because the reaction of the early 1810s against Napoleon, his wars, and his empire-building—themselves all by-products of the French Revolution—had been general, with the ruling classes, the masses, and the intellectuals all attacking the French regime. As we have seen, German intellectuals had in many cases received Napoleon rather warmly at first; G. W. F. Hegel famously declared in 1806, watching the Emperor ride into Jena after winning the battle outside its gates, “I have seen the World Spirit on horseback!” He continued to champion Napoleon as the personification of progress and human enlightenment (even though his house was promptly looted by French soldiers).³⁶⁰ Johannes von Müller, with whom Gentz had had such a spectacular falling out in 1807, had gladly become a minor functionary in the short-lived Kingdom of Westphalia,³⁶¹ and Ernst Ludwig Posselt, the editor of the *Europäische Annalen*, had at one point gone so far as to call for the Emperor’s name to be chiseled in gold on one of the Alpine mountains, and even defended French looting of Italian art treasures as Italy’s “first step into the hallowed temple of liberty.”³⁶²

Nonetheless, the heavy burdens placed on the German states in the course of the Napoleonic Wars, both political and economic, gradually led to an anti-French reaction. During the War of Liberation in 1813, German romanticists took the lead in opposing everything that smacked of French culture, and the younger individuals among them often joined the *Landswehr* and other militia organizations. The monarchs and court circles were willing to tolerate this popular enthusiasm as long as it furthered their goal of defeating Napoleon; the trouble was that the artists and writers refused to let it die down after 1814. The frequently virulent anti-French sentiment of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany can be directly traced to this period, as

³⁶⁰ *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1952), I, 119.

³⁶¹ See Chapter 5.

³⁶² Ernst Ludwig Posselt, *Europäische Annalen*, Tübingen, 1804.

a Francophobic, often generally xenophobic nationalist sentiment took hold. It was best expressed by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, leader of the *Turnbewegung*, or gymnasts' movement in the 1810s and 1820s, who taught his followers the slogan, "If you let your daughter learn French, you might just as well train her to become a whore."³⁶³

Jahn's movement, founded in 1811, exemplifies the cross-currents existing in German society in the 1810s as a result of the Napoleonic Wars. On the one hand, Jahn and his gymnasts seemed to have the same aim as the Old Regime powers fighting against Napoleon: the defeat of the expansionist French. Their aim was to make themselves physically fit and emotionally steeled for the day when the German nation rose against the French. However, even this suggested that their first loyalty was not to the kings and princes who ruled over them. And while Jahn never preached disobedience to the native rulers, his language and rules for the movement made it clear that he had quite different notions of order and liberty. For example, he taught his gymnasts to walk rather than march, on the basis that they were free men and not automatons to serve another's will. They addressed each other with the familiar German "*Du*," rather than the formal "*Sie*," wore a single costume without blandishments to indicate rank in the organization (there was none), and sang that "*An Rang und Stand sind alle gleich*" ("in rank and estate all {gymnasts} are equal"). As the historian Christopher Clark put it, "Here was a clear demonstration of how patriotism could provide the key to a reconceptualization of political culture as rooted in voluntary allegiances rather than hierarchical structures of authority."³⁶⁴

Nationalism at this time tended to stress cultural over political unity; it was more important that one be a pure German than that all Germans live together in a single nation-state.

³⁶³ Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 82.

³⁶⁴ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 352.

Yet among Jahn and those of similar mind, there was already a good deal of contempt for the petty princedoms into which Germany had for so long been divided, expressed in Ernst Moritz Arndt's *Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?*

Was ist das Deutsche Vaterland?/So nenne mir das grosse Land!/Ist's was der
Fuersten Trug zerklaut?/Vom Kaiser und vom Reich geraubt?/O nein! nein!
nein!/Sein Vaterland muss groesser seyn!³⁶⁵

These expressions did give rise to a desire for a nation with at least a stronger political structure than it presently had (or had had under the Holy Roman Empire, another object of their scorn). Nor was it forgotten that during most of the Napoleonic period, the rulers of those princedoms had been more interested in aggrandizing their own power than in the holy cause of freeing their fellow Germans. The weak Confederation which emerged at Vienna, preserving this hierarchical political order, was not at all what these nationalists had in mind, and as one of its architects and chief spokesmen, Gentz was a target of their criticism almost from the moment the smoke cleared at Waterloo, and certainly from the signing of the second Treaty of Paris onward.

His chief antagonist at this time was Joseph Görres, editor of the *Rheinische Merkur* in Koblenz. Very much belonging to the revolutionary age (born 1776; died 1848), Görres' life was a grand tour of the political spectrum. A passionate supporter of the Jacobins and early Napoleonic rule, he later turned viciously against Bonaparte and became associated with Romanticism and the movement for national liberation. He would end his life as a traditionalist and Catholic publicist in Bavaria, but in 1815-16 he was a leading voice for the nationalists, demanding a united Germany that somehow combined liberal democracy with Christian faith

³⁶⁵ Ernst Moritz Arndt, "Das Deutsche Vaterland," Ernst-Moritz-Arndt Gesellschaft.

and veneration of the past.³⁶⁶ Görres attacked Gentz' defense of the Paris accords, made in the December 1815 issue of the *Austrian Observer*, protesting that France had not been sufficiently punished; it was as powerful as it had been when it first invaded the Rhineland, twenty-odd years ago; it had not even had to surrender the border region of Alsace-Lorraine, which everyone knew was basically German anyway. The conqueror had been favored, the conquered slighted, the *Merkur* editor fumed; and patriotic Germans could now only look to God to save them from their misery.³⁶⁷

Gentz was highly annoyed, and was at some pains to rebut Görres in the next issue of the *Observer*. Surely, he replied, a man so intelligent and insightful could not fail to grasp that in a situation as extraordinary as the late war, where all the European powers had had to unite and cooperate to defeat France, the concerns and goals of each had to be taken into consideration in the ensuing peace. It was not just about what was good for the Germans; at Vienna, they had the fate of the whole continent to think of. That included a final treaty that was fair to France, rather than seeking retribution: "it was not a matter of how much land or how much money should be stripped from France... {as possible without} extending the war to desperate extremities. A higher policy had to guide the negotiations at every step." The alternative would have been a resentful French population and the threat of more eruptions in the future.³⁶⁸

Besides, the German states really had not done so badly at Vienna. They had been given the groundwork of a federal union with the Confederation, and Prussia, to which so many nationalists looked, had emerged stronger than ever. The French border was no closer to the

³⁶⁶ For a more extensive treatment of this liberal-romantic Catholic, see Jon Vanden Heuvel, *A German Life in the Age of Revolution: Joseph Görres, 1776-1848* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

³⁶⁷ *Rheinische Merkur*, Dec. 5, 1815.

³⁶⁸ Friedrich Gentz, *Staatsschriften und Briefe: Auswahl in zwei Bänden*, ed. Hans von Eckardt (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1921), II, 11-31.

Rhine than it had been in 1789, and future attempts at encroachment were hardly likely. The only actual complaints, Gentz considered, were that 1) Alsace and Lorraine had not been “returned” to German control, and 2) the German states had not been given an overarching constitution, which Görres and others ardently desired. As to the first charge, he continued, Alsace and Lorraine, though linguistically and culturally German, had been part of France since the reign of Louis XVI over a century ago; to detach them now would serve no purpose except to antagonize that nation. The second charge, that Germany was languishing without a general constitution, was true only in the minds of idealistic scribblers like Görres. In their actual day-to-day lives, the German people were no worse off than they had been previously; the individual states, for all their varying infirmities, kept law and order, the real foundation for a happy existence, as well as they ever had.

Only time would tell if those states would choose to draw together into a closer union; but in the meantime, to say, as Görres did, that Germany was in a state of anarchy without such an organization—why, “one could with equal justice say that Europe too is in a state of anarchy, so long as it is a mere aggregate of independent states without a supreme tribunal or a supreme executive power.”³⁶⁹ The ends of government went far beyond having a particular written document or a particular structure. They were to provide a peaceful, ordered, and so far as possible, a happy existence for their people; and in that, the German states were doing just fine, whatever a few irritable activists might say. Gentz and the other negotiators at Vienna and then Paris had done their best to encourage these conditions for all of Europe, and he expressed the hope, there and elsewhere, that the next decades would prove to be “a golden age” for Germans and Europeans in general.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ *Staatschriften und Briefe*, II, 25.

³⁷⁰ *Schriften von Gentz*, II, 422.

That, of course, remained to be seen. Gentz was rather satisfied with his counterblast against Görres, which closely mirrored his more philosophical treatises of the 1790s: detail-oriented, pragmatic, opposed to all abstract idealism. But for many German liberals and romantics, it was only further evidence of all that was wrong with the Old Regime and its way of thinking. During the late 1810s, ferment against the Confederation and the Restoration in general continued among these groups, especially among politically active university students. Wishing to maintain the ideals of brotherhood and equality that had supposedly flourished during the War of Liberation, they began to establish *Burschenschaften*, patriotic fraternities dedicated to the pursuit of their proclaimed goals of “honor, freedom, [and] fatherland.” The first, and one of the most active *Burschenschaften*, was the so-called “Teutonia,” founded by the students at Jena in June 1815. Many of them had volunteered in various *Freikorps* during the War of Liberation, and agitated on that basis for a national, liberal government for Germany, one that would triumph over the forces of reaction.

On October 18, 1817, members of the Jena group and other liberal patriots marched to the Wartburg Castle, outside nearby Eisenach. Both time and place were significant: Exactly four years ago, as everyone well knew, the Battle of the Nations had been fought at Leipzig, and it was almost the 300th anniversary of Martin Luther’s public posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, the event which triggered the Protestant Reformation and, to German Protestants, the escape of their ancestors from a foreign, papal tyranny. Luther had translated the Bible into German while hiding in the Wartburg during the early 1520s, and in the process practically invented a standard German language. The castle was to German nationalists, therefore, something akin to holy ground, and they used the grounds around it to stage a mass rally, singing patriotic hymns, displaying the recently invented black-red-gold flag that represented a united Germany, and—

most notoriously—building a bonfire and tossing into it various printed works considered anti-German. These included the Napoleonic Code and commentaries on it, *On Sovereignty* by Gentz’s distant relative, Jean Pierre Frédéric Ancillon, a political commentary by the Swiss legal scholar Karl Ludwig von Haller, a national history by August von Kotzebue, and other literature.

Thus for the first (but not the last) time did German nationalism become associated with book-burning.³⁷¹ Heinrich Heine, though an ardent nationalist himself at the time, was disgusted by such displays, which formed part of the inspiration for his later quip, “Those who begin by burning books end by burning bodies.”³⁷² And while it was intended as a show of national unity by the participants, the Wartburgfest did raise some troubling questions. What was the place of Catholics, for example, in a nationalist festival held on one of the sacred sites of German Protestantism? What lay at the core of the nationalist ideal?

Gentz’s written reaction to news of the Wartburg Festival, published in installments in the *Austrian Observer* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung* in the winter of 1817-18, was a mixture of snide mockery and astute analysis of the long-term consequences of and contradictions within the budding nationalist movement. Observing that the activism and violent rhetoric of the nationalists was in some way a part of what was already being called the “Zeitgeist,” he described it as an act of political and moral immaturity, explained by the youth of the participants themselves: “The youth should dedicate the precious years of his training as a capable citizen and future functionary, not to vain and impudent reasoning on matters about which he knows nothing, and to know...that {his humble condition} makes him quite incapable of that public judgment forbidden to him.” At other points, he asks rhetorically, “Should barely

³⁷¹ Franz Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1929), II, 245-46.

³⁷² Heinrich Heine, *Almansor: A Tragedy*, in *True Religion*, Graham Ward ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 142.

nubile boys make laws for us, and students revolutionize our states? Have youths the right to stop the highest matters of the Fatherland or the workings of the law?" Not statements likely to endear him to the *Burschenschaften* and *Gymnasium* members, but Gentz at the same time warns that something much deeper is going on. The festival, he writes, had both political and religious overtones, and indeed blended the two to a degree not previously seen in Germany.³⁷³

Within the invective, Gentz asks a number of questions that force the reader to make a comparison between the moral absolutism of the French Revolution, with all its violent consequences, and the similar attitude displayed by the nationalist youth. "Are university lecturers there to create a political *Freikorps*?" he inquired. "They call this progress, this aping of the external customs and costumes of 'ancestors'? And this prejudice, that an enemy refuted must either commit himself or his writings to the flames, bears the mark of an enlightened century?"³⁷⁴ Gentz was making essentially the same point he had made a quarter-century before, as an enlightened critic of the French Revolution, and one that the liberal writer Heine would make, a decade or two later; the intolerance displayed by the intellectual community, in which the world was divided into the virtuous and the wicked, encouraged its members to treat flesh-and-blood individuals in a similarly abstract way. This was how the Revolution had ended in the Reign of Terror, and it was hard for Gentz and others to see why the current wave of nationalist enthusiasm might not end in a similar hecatomb.

As we have seen, Gentz was hardly immune to the call of German unity himself. He had said that he regarded himself as a German first and foremost, and had been highly complimentary of the work of Fichte, who had helped bring on the current wave of

³⁷³ *Staatsschriften und Briefe*, II, 32-35.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

nationalism.³⁷⁵ Like many educated men of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, he favored a *cultural* unification of Germany, one based on a common language, similar customs, and a general sense of “Germanness.” These student clubs made it clear, however, that what they really wanted was not just cultural but political unification, which would mean the final destruction of the legitimacy principle and the entire international system the men at Vienna had worked so hard to create. “Thus,” he wrote, “it is revolutionary in the most extreme and dangerous sense of this term. For think what one may, theoretically or historically, of the present organization of the German states, the unification toward which these true and consummate Jacobins have been striving for six years cannot be achieved without the most violent revolutions, without the overthrow of Europe.”³⁷⁶

Gentz’s response also highlights the sharp divergence of memories of the War of Liberation taking place only four years after its conclusion. One of the works burned with particular relish at the Wartburg Festival was a pamphlet by Theodor Schmalz, rector of the University of Berlin, who had denied that spontaneous patriotism had had anything to do with the war effort in 1813. Yes, tens of thousands of Germans had rallied to the colors, Schmalz acknowledged, but these were the colors of their rightful sovereigns, and they had done so for reasons of duty, not emotional zeal. To enlist in the army under such conditions, he argued, was no different than helping to put out the fire in a neighbor’s house.³⁷⁷ Similarly, in his reply, Gentz dismissed the notion that this had been a people’s war or national crusade, or that the volunteers and patriotic societies had won it. The victory was righteous enough, but it had been won by the princes and their ministers and generals, not the people. “They prepared the war,

³⁷⁵ See Chapter 5.

³⁷⁶ *Staatsschriften und Briefe*, II, 53.

³⁷⁷ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 378.

founded it, created it. They did even more: they led it, nourished and enlivened it....Those who today in their youthful audacity suppose that they overturned the tyrant, couldn't even have driven him out of Germany."³⁷⁸ Statesmen like Gentz and the students at the Wartburg, flying the colors of the Lützow volunteer corps, were already becoming incomprehensible to one another.

Events such as these were causing Gentz to revise his opinions of only a few years earlier. In 1815-16 it had seemed to him that the "Whites" and "ultras" were the greater threat to the peace of Europe, but he was now coming around to the belief that Jacobin-style revolution was far more active than he had believed, and the most imminent source of danger. The revolutionary violence Gentz envisioned among the German nationalists seemed to have been borne out before the decade was over. Among the Jena students at the Wartburg Festival was a Prussia native and veteran of the War of Liberation, Karl Ludwig Sand. Born in 1795, Sand stood out even among his fellow nationalists for his quiet but stubborn political fanaticism and a growing tendency to think of himself as a Christ figure, destined to redeem his beloved Germany. This was combined with a certain emotional instability; even his admirers admitted, after the fact, that he was something of a hypochondriac.³⁷⁹ Like many in the *Burschenschaften*, he viewed those who made up the Restoration as his personal enemies, and by the spring of 1818 he had begun to focus in particular on the playwright August von Kotzebue, some of whose writings had been burned at Wartburg. Not only had Kotzebue repeatedly mocked the nationalist societies in his literature (taking aim at their demands for political liberalism but also their anti-Semitic streak), he was generally suspected of being a spy for the Russian government—a charge disproven by more recent research—and thus a traitor to his nation twice over. Besides that, some of his plays contained a rather unbuttoned view of sexual morality, or at least Sand and

³⁷⁸ *Schriften von Gentz*, II, 84.

³⁷⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Carové, *Ueber die Ermordung Kotzebue's* (Eisenach, 1819).

other followers of Jahn saw it as such, and therefore contributed to the degradation of personal character, especially among young women, and of the nation's collective virtue. For all of this, his death was a necessity.

On March 23, 1819, after a two-week journey from his home, Sand arrived in Mannheim and went immediately to Kotzebue's house. After talking his way inside, he confronted the fifty-seven-year-old "wretch, the traitor, the seducer of youth," and stabbed him to death, then plunged the knife into his own chest, expressing, according to most reports, his joy at avenging his betrayed Fatherland. The young man did not, in fact, die of his wounds, living to stand trial and be sentenced to death, which was carried out in May 1820.³⁸⁰

The murder of Kotzebue sent a shock wave through Europe. Whatever Sand and the *Burschenschaften* thought of him, the playwright was a popular, prolific, and respected member of the international intellectual community; a man who had been on friendly terms with Beethoven and counted Jane Austen among his admirers. Gentz himself had met Kotzebue, as part of the literary circle that included Goethe and Schiller, during his Weimar trip in 1801.³⁸¹ For such a man to be cut down by a twenty-three-year-old student with an obvious Messiah complex seemed to serve as a warning: the fanaticism of a generation ago was alive and well. There might be thousands of Karl Sands in Europe, each of whom could take it into their heads to kill those who did not meet their own standards of patriotism.

³⁸⁰ There are numerous accounts, mostly in German, of Kotzebue's assassination. One of the first contemporary publications on the event was Friedrich Wilhelm Carové's *Ueber die Ermordung Kotzebue's* (Eisenach, 1819). The French novelist Alexandre Dumas interviewed the son of Sand's executioner and included the event in his *Crimes Célèbres* (Paris, 1839). One of the few lengthy English-language treatments of the murder is George S. Williamson, "What Killed August von Kotzebue? The Temptations of Virtue and the Political Theology of German Nationalism, 1789-1819," in *The Journal of Modern History* (2000). Williamson gives particular attention to the role sexual morality played in the assassination.

³⁸¹ See Chapter 4.

That Gentz, along with Metternich and so many others, was genuinely shocked and frightened by the assassination is not to be doubted. In April 1819, shortly after receiving the news from Mannheim, he wrote to Metternich (who was then in Italy), calling Kotzebue's death "an unmistakable symptom of the degree of malignity which the pestilential fever of our day has attained. My opinion has been for a long time that Germany is incomparably more diseased than France." The minister fully agreed, writing that conditions in Europe were even more explosive than they had been in 1789. In the same letter, Gentz made it clear that he saw radical nationalist scribblers like Arndt as ultimately responsible for the murder. "The proclamation found [on Sand]...has not only the ideas but the words, the phrases, the entire style and tone of this fiend," he announced.³⁸² The departure from 1807, when he had expressed at least limited admiration for Arndt and other voices for national unity, and from his initial post-Vienna moderation, was now complete.

Gentz had been turning his thoughts toward a more conservative revision of the Confederation's statutes even before Kotzebue's murder, publishing an article in the *Jahrbücher* in late 1818 that analyzed legal limitations on press freedom in the more "enlightened" land of Britain. The following February, the month before the assassination, he penned a new memorandum, "Remarks upon the First Proceedings in the Bavarian General Assembly," denouncing that body as a place where unrestrained opposition and foment against the monarchy had broken out—a clear warning, he thought, of where constitutional monarchies could lead.³⁸³ Given all this and Metternich's own proclivities, it seems clear that the two were preparing the ground for a rollback of such freedoms in Germany already, but Sand provided an excellent

³⁸² *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 361, 387, 391-92.

³⁸³ *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 104.

pretext. The Diet met in Karlsbad in the summer of 1819 to discuss how the states might best impose restrictions on political radicalism.

Gentz by this time had developed, through an exchange of views with his old friend Adam Müller, a comprehensive vision of what ought to be done to reverse the situation in Germany, particularly with respect to education and the radicalism in the universities. In a June 1819 letter to Müller, he outlined the chief sources of the current trouble and how to contain them. The troubles were manifold, he wrote: the individual states were (with a few exceptions) either too much in thrall to their subjects and base popular opinion, too interested in liberal innovations themselves, or (in the case of Prussia) too focused on their own agendas to form a strong counter-revolutionary front. (He was certainly thinking of Arndt again here; the fact that Prussia continued to employ him on the faculty at Bonn was to Gentz unconscionable.) The professors had mostly come of age in the Revolutionary era and were thus given to criticize and agitate against the status quo. The students' "philosophy," if it could be called that, was a mix of nationalism, mysticism, and religious fanaticism. Equally bad, the *Burschenschaften* continued to flourish, despite being, he now recognized, "expressly and substantively based on the idea of a united Germany, nor merely an ideal or scientific or literary, but a corporeal political unity," which could not be achieved "without the most violent revolutions, without the upheaval of Europe."³⁸⁴ That was the real problem; taking pride in one's Germanness was not objectionable at all--Gentz himself was "guilty" of that--but to create a German nation-state would require a political revolution every bit as destabilizing as the French Revolution. An effective response was therefore imperative.

This academic activism, Gentz continued, needed to be assaulted on multiple fronts.

³⁸⁴ *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Adam Müller*, 275.

Though he had initially toyed with revoking or significantly altering the charters of the various universities, he now agreed with Müller that such an attempt would only inflame their opponents further. Instead, looking backward to the structures of the Old Regime, he proposed strengthening the power of the leadership and restoring their old corporate institutions, such as the university Senates, which would, he felt, give the professors a greater sense of dignity and responsibility and make them allies of the forces of order. At the same time, the most dangerous professors must be removed from their posts, encouraging the rest to quiet down or depart of their own accord, and each institution must be equipped with a curator, someone who would exercise a firm hand over rebellious teachers and students while also building bridges between the school, the local community, and the Bundestag. External policing should be avoided as far as possible—except in the case of the *Burschenschaften*, which, Gentz insisted, absolutely must be dissolved or drastically reformed. It was absolutely necessary, moreover, that Austria take the lead in these matters; it alone, according to him, possessed the physical and moral authority to form a consensus among the other German states and make these policies generally applicable.³⁸⁵

Beyond these matters of policy, Gentz also recognized (as did Müller) the problem of first principles—how to win the hearts and minds of the young students for conservatism, or at least for the established order. He was certain that the platitudes of the day—“that the youth must be educated above all to be independent and exalted above all authorities” and “that the clash of opinions alone leads to truth”—must be rejected and that the students must be taught subordination and respect; but how to do it was another matter. His answer was that the philosophic and critical studies should be discouraged altogether at universities, in favor of the “positive” (what we would call “natural”) sciences.³⁸⁶ How exactly this would achieve the

³⁸⁵ *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Adam Müller*, 288.

³⁸⁶ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 462.

desired result, Gentz does not say, and his system appears to fall apart at this point. There is a tentative suggestion that if the pre-revolutionary clerical estate was restored, it would solve things by once more instilling Christian virtue in the youth; but Gentz quickly veers away from this topic, preferring to focus on concrete political objectives. Altogether, his project can be described as an effort to revive the form of the Old Regime corporatist structures, but not their function. There is no doubt Gentz felt these would be very useful and beneficial, but only as long as they served the ends for which he was calling them back into existence. In making the university senates and similar bodies the puppets of higher authority, he was calling for a degree of centralization that had not existed before 1789. Even in this more mature phase of his career, he remained the product of enlightened, absolutist Prussia, and saw the political order, now as in the 1790s, in terms of individuals versus the state, with nothing in between.

The result of these calls for action was a meeting of representatives from the larger German states, including Metternich and Gentz from Austria, at Karlsbad in August 1819, resulting in the promulgation of the “Karlsbad Decrees.” As with so many of the events in which he was involved, it is difficult if not impossible to say with certainty how much of this document Gentz was directly responsible for. Not being the head of a government bureau or department, but rather a publicist and diplomatic middleman, he could make no final decisions, only argue his case to those who could. That said, all the sources are in agreement that the Decrees were quite as much his work as Metternich’s, these two men working in closer conjunction, perhaps, than they ever had before.³⁸⁷ And together, they were able to impose their will on Germany. The Decrees established a curator at each German university to oversee and regulate student activity, removed professors with suspect views from their positions, and banned the *Burschenschaften*

³⁸⁷ See Srbik, *Metternich*, I, 589; Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 222-27.

altogether. Moreover, forgetting his previous statement to Görres about respecting freedom of the press—“we do not mean the external right [to critique official actions], which we in no case wish to restrict”³⁸⁸—Gentz was now instrumental in drafting an additional measure imposing censorship on publications throughout the Confederation, subsequently arguing, “In the last few years we have been so overwhelmed with political ideas and dreams that every rational man ought sincerely to think himself...lucky, should it be possible, amid this wild and confused commotion, to find a short pause for meditation.”³⁸⁹

Much of this was along the lines of what he had earlier proposed to Müller, and indeed, it could be said that Gentz was never more fully in the conservative camp than he was at Karlsbad—though he was not quite sure it was enough, and continued to fumble towards a more satisfactory settlement. Still, he was rather optimistic in the immediate aftermath of the Decrees’ passage, telling Müller their first counterstrike against the radicals had been a definite success, and that they must now prepare for further measures.³⁹⁰

As he might have expected by now, liberals and radicals were quick to cry foul over the Decrees, and accused him of being an unprincipled opportunist. They especially pointed to the appeal a younger Gentz had made to Friedrich Wilhelm III, over twenty years ago, calling for the very freedom of the press he was now trying to stamp out. On the printed page, the contrast seemed real enough, and he could hardly refute the charge directly; at times, he attempted to deny the about-face, claiming he had then advocated freedom of the press “not as a right of man” but merely as sound government policy in advancing the cause of enlightenment and gradual reform, to be revoked as events dictated. More honestly, though, he remarked in one letter that

³⁸⁸ *Staatschriften und Briefe*, II, 31.

³⁸⁹ *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 115.

³⁹⁰ *Briefwechsel*, 300.

those had been the words of a very foolish young man, and that he wished to undo the evil he might have helped create.³⁹¹

At any rate, Gentz did not allow himself to be stymied by charges of hypocrisy, any more than he had in other situations. Simultaneous with the passing of the Decrees, he succeeded in convincing the Diet to ban the *Deutsche Beobachter* outright, an action he described to Pilat as “a more important event than the conquest of Spain,” and later helped maneuver it into extending the duration of the Decrees.³⁹² Where freedom of the press was concerned, Gentz had taken an arch-reactionary position, and stuck to it for some years. In the same letter he admonished Pilat that to preserve the peace and order of Europe, censorship must be “the supreme law of the Confederation.” Nor was this his only concern. In December 1822 he wrote a further memorandum, “On the Means for the Protection of Order and Peace in Germany in the Federal Constitution,” arguing that it was legally possible for the central body of the Confederation to intervene in the affairs of the individual states, should such action be deemed necessary to secure the “monarchical principle.”³⁹³ This would be the case, as it turned out, even when the monarch was not being intimidated by hostile elements, but acting of his own free will. When the king of Württemberg, where several especially vocal radical newspapers were published—he considered this state to be an even greater source of trouble for the Confederation than Saxony—ignored demands from Vienna to rein in the press, Gentz helped arrange the cutting of ties with Stuttgart by Austria, Prussia, and Russia.³⁹⁴ The monarchical principle would be defended, even if a few monarchs had to be smacked around in the process.

³⁹¹ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 77.

³⁹² *Gentz an Pilat*, I, 148.

³⁹³ *Schriften von Gentz*, II, 155.

³⁹⁴ *Gentz, Tagebücher*, III, 181-85.

Whether the Karlsbad Decrees were really helpful to Metternich and the whole process of Restoration may be doubted. The nationalists did not regard them as legitimate orders; they were too obviously the creation of the Austrian government, and the Diet's quick passage of the laws only encouraged the belief that it was Vienna's plaything. At the same time, it was soon clear that they would not be uniformly enforced by the German states themselves. Baden, Württemberg, and Bavaria, in particular, refused to do so at all, and others interpreted in varying ways how stringently the decrees should be applied. Thus, as so often happened, Metternich and Gentz got the worst of both worlds: the decrees were harsh enough to infuriate the nationalists but not forceful enough to silence them. If anything, the whole episode had the effect of encouraging the marriage of German nationalism to revolutionary politics. Joseph Görres, whose Rhenish newspaper had been shut down by the Prussians in accordance with the decrees, noted this union and predicted that if it ever did enact a revolution, it would "inevitably end with the expulsion of all ruling dynasties...the extermination of the aristocracy and the introduction of a republican constitution," and would finally "step beyond its frontiers and destroy Europe's whole rotten political system as far as the frontiers of Asia, because every revolutionized nation becomes a conquering one."³⁹⁵ In a perverse way, then, Gentz had indirectly helped make possible the specter he had raised a quarter-century earlier, in his first assault on the French Revolution: that of a people shouting "*ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*."³⁹⁶

Possibly this judgment is a bit extreme. Gentz had tried to construct a conservative order that would be based on inspiration and genuine commitment, not just fear and repression; and if the Karlsbad Decrees were not consistently enforced, that was at least partly the fault of the member states (though one could just as easily argue that Gentz and Metternich should not have

³⁹⁵ *Rheinischer Merkur*, Dec. 5, 1815.

³⁹⁶ See Chapter 3.

alienated some of them with such harsh measures in the first place). Some reaction to Kotzebue's murder was inevitable, for 1819-20 appeared to be a time of threat to the European order in general. Revolutionary activity, it seemed, was to be found wherever one looked. In the Mediterranean, insurgencies plagued the governments of Spain, Piedmont-Sardinia, and the Two Sicilies, while Greece was already in the throes of rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, an event which will be dealt with in greater detail in the next chapter. In France, the Duc de Berry, heir to the throne, was assassinated as Kotzebue had been, while in Britain, a plot to kill the Tory leadership in Parliament was narrowly averted. In these countries, too, there was a backlash in the form of repressive legislation that sought to stifle political agitation. The Karlsbad Decrees must be understood in this broader European context.

Regardless, it must be said that Gentz's impact on Germany and its political development was probably at its peak at the time of these decrees. The relationship between him and Metternich was never closer or more harmonious, it seemed, than it was now, and the results at Karlsbad were at least as much his doing as the prince's.³⁹⁷ As for the results achieved by his literary campaign, one German historian has said that his writings "had at once momentous repercussions on practical politics and on German constitutional theory in the following decades, mainly because Gentz's conceptual definitions and his reasoning unilaterally settled the constitutional question on the side of Austrian policy....He had thus provided the foundation for the conservative ideology."³⁹⁸

Nor did Gentz slacken his attentiveness to the specter of revolution in Germany in the years after Karlsbad. He drafted and successfully pushed through a second series of decrees at the Confederation Diet in Frankfurt in 1823, reinforcing some of the earlier measures, and

³⁹⁷ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 223-24, 229, 235.

³⁹⁸ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 370.

continually hectored states like Hannover and Saxony, albeit with mixed results, to send more reliably conservative representatives to that body. These efforts saw the closing down of the more troublesome liberal newspapers in Germany by 1823-4, and their editors sent packing. Though he would have been the first to admit that much remained to be done, all in all, Gentz could (and did) congratulate himself on having rid the Confederation of the “revolutionary chiefs and agents.”³⁹⁹

The problem of how to construct a real, lasting conservatism would continue to occupy him throughout the 1820s, as would the efforts to maintain what the Congress of Vienna had set in place. As the decade went on, though, and Gentz shifted into the role of elder statesman, these labors were undertaken with less passion and more calm detachment. His final years would be devoted not to ideological battle but to a pragmatic solution to the ills that plagued Europe.

³⁹⁹ *Briefe von Gentz*, III, pt. 1, 483.

Chapter 9

The chief features [of my illness] are continually recurring unrest and deep sorrow at the shaping of conditions which are driving us more and more to the wall,--the bitter consciousness that I can do nothing against it, that I am daily becoming more estranged from the new order of things, that my role is played and the fruit of forty years of labor as good as lost...I do not know how to free myself,--discontent with myself and with the world,--the feeling of increasing age and the fear of death which you, of course know; are these not enough to make one sick?
-Gentz, 1831⁴⁰⁰

The above passage, written a year before Gentz's death, is sometimes cited as an instance of the gloominess and pessimism into which he had fallen by the end of his life. All of his work since 1814, his efforts to establish a conservative order in Europe, had been for nothing, and the specter of revolution was unstoppable. This is certainly a reasonable interpretation. By the early 1830s, the prosecutorial, reactionary spirit that had infused Gentz at the time of the Karlsbad Decrees was definitely gone; he had come to believe that such attempts to brutally stamp out liberalism were fruitless. However, looking at events from this perspective alone ignores many of the complexities that were part of his political thought. As seen many times before, Gentz was not a consistent reactionary. Before the Wartburg Festival and the murder of Kotzebue, he had been more concerned with the "ultras" and other arch-conservatives. For him, the goal had always been the balance of power and its maintenance, and he was prone to making adjustments on particular policies to pursue it. Seen from this respect, Gentz's evolving political position between the early 1820s and early 1830s represents not an abject surrender to abstract Progress, but rather a modification of method in order to shore up European conservatism and preserve the political balance he had had such a hand in crafting.

⁴⁰⁰ *Staatsschriften und Briefe*, II, 272.

When it came to the fact or threat of revolution in the late 1810s and early 1820s, Germany by no means claimed the entirety of Gentz's attention. The revolutionary elements that had brought on the Karlsbad Decrees were by no means unique to that corner of the map, and he was every bit as concerned by threats elsewhere. What troubled him was not unrest per se, but rather a specific set of threats. One was agitation against the political authorities, whether through journalism, protests, or more violent actions, as had already occurred in Germany. Another pressing issue for Gentz, though, was preserving the continuity of the existing European governments, a principle often referred to as "legitimacy." For him, as well as for Metternich and others, this meant not just protecting those governments, especially the monarchies among them, from overthrow by rebellious subjects, but also ensuring that those governments did not act to undermine each other. In short, the concert that had existed among the European powers at Vienna (if only on paper) was to be extended as far into the future as possible. This proved an impossible task in the end, though Gentz did help sustain the effort far longer than might have been expected.

Previously, he had held out considerable hope for the utility of the Congress system in resolving these many problems of the postwar order. It had been arranged at Vienna that the various Powers should convene periodically to discuss matters concerning the peace and security of Europe, and they did so up through the early 1820s. Gentz was a leading figure at such assemblies, on account of his talents and past labors, and helped steer their members towards decisions that upheld the Restoration principles. At Troppau in 1820, for example, he successfully pressed for the declaration that armed intervention could be employed against a state in which revolution had broken out, a principle used by France to support Spain's

Ferdinand VII in 1822.⁴⁰¹ Such achievements were gratifying, and he was highly pleased by the praises which came his way as a result. “Never have the laurels been so heaped on my head as this time,” Gentz told Adam Müller after Aachen. “Every day the flattering song was sung to me: ‘Without [you] there could be no congress.’ They wanted to compel me to marry, in order that my race [that is, his bloodline] at least might not die out.”⁴⁰² He thoroughly enjoyed such gatherings, partly because of the social opportunities they afforded—his old friends in the diplomatic corps tended to dominate these affairs—and partly because he felt they were much more conducive to their stated goal than one-on-one negotiations between individual states. In fact, Talleyrand had even suggested a permanent Congress, before things broke up in Vienna, with Gentz as its “Secretary-General,” a notion he no doubt found very gratifying—but Metternich and the other key figures dismissed the idea and nothing came of it.⁴⁰³

The Congresses which did meet—at Aachen, Laibach, Troppau, and Verona—were indeed of considerable use in maintaining the newly-won peace. Among other things, they prevented an overreacting Metternich from sending Austrian troops into Naples to prop up Ferdinand VII during a revolution in 1820; a policy Gentz himself opposed, in these particular circumstances, because of its possible disruption of Italian affairs.⁴⁰⁴ However, he was increasingly disturbed by signs that the Congresses could not get the respective powers to act in concert. The system was bound to work only as long as all the major powers actively participated in it, and British interests were increasingly deviating from those of Austria, Prussia, and Russia; Castlereagh (and later George Canning) was unwilling to commit men to plans of armed intervention all over Europe, preferring to deal with revolutionary activity on a case-by-case

⁴⁰¹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 228-29.

⁴⁰² *Briefwechsel zwischen Gentz und Adam Müller*, 266.

⁴⁰³ Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 421.

⁴⁰⁴ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 268-69.

basis. British representatives soon came as observers rather than real participants, and without their naval and colonial power, Continental cooperation was seriously impaired. The Congress at Verona in 1822 was the last, after which there was increasing divergence between the different parties, as individual foreign and domestic policies reasserted themselves. Still, neither Gentz nor most others regarded the Congresses as total failures: Austria had at least succeeded in reinforcing the conservative ascendancy on the Continent, and maintained an alliance of interests with Prussia and Russia.

Of the many potential theaters of activity, two in particular were of interest to him, and to so many others at the time. The first of these was Latin America, an area in which Austria had no direct interest but which was concerning to conservatives of all nationalities as a further threat to the principles of monarchy and legitimacy. The collapse of Spanish authority as a result of Napoleon's invasion of the mother country had set off rebellions and independence movements of one form or another from 1808 onward, from Mexico to Argentina. Spain's attempts after 1814 to recover its colonies had been fitful and generally unsuccessful, and by the early 1820s, it was clear that its American empire would be replaced with a constellation of new republics.

Though American affairs were not of particular importance to Austria, Gentz had always kept an eye on events in the Western Hemisphere, and being rather better informed than most of his contemporaries, recognized soon enough that as far as Spain was concerned, its position was probably irretrievable. He set his ideas out in a January 1824 memorandum, partly in reaction to the United States' newly issued Monroe Doctrine. His earlier support for the American Revolution notwithstanding, Gentz had become more and more concerned about the young nation and its expansionism, and he now labeled the Doctrine a piece of "unparalleled impudence." A man who had spent over twenty years on such questions as territorial claims was

never likely to accept the pronouncement that an entire hemisphere was off limits to other powers' interference.⁴⁰⁵

But he did not allow his contempt for the document and its principles to distract him from the facts on the ground. There could be no question that between U.S. opposition, the effectively independent status of the ex-colonies, and British aid to the new governments, going from furtive to full-blown, an American *Reconquista* was not in the cards.⁴⁰⁶ Spain (and its friends) could ignore this fact and make the situation worse, or it could accept the new reality and try to have a constructive relationship with its lost empire. Gentz proposed a conference of the European powers in which there would be a "pro forma" discussion of aiding Spanish re-conquest, but in reality would quickly move to recognizing Latin American independence. In his outlined scheme, the Spanish and Portuguese would acknowledge the former colonies' desire for independence, but with such decorous motions and conditional statements that self-rule would seem like a grant from the mother countries, rather than having been seized from them. Moreover, the newly independent nations, rather than becoming republics, would be organized as monarchies with members of the Spanish Bourbon family at their head, along the lines of the settlement worked out between Portugal and Brazil; and Spain would receive some form of financial compensation from its former colonies.⁴⁰⁷ Theoretically, such a settlement would maintain benevolent ties between the different parties, propping up the prestige of the Spanish

⁴⁰⁵ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 2, 85-6.

⁴⁰⁶ In fact, Gentz seemed to consider the first of these alone a sufficient obstacle. With uncanny prescience, he predicted that the United States would become "a new Colossus" to rival European power "in the next fifty to one hundred years." Once more he showed a firmer grasp of American potential than most of his contemporaries.

⁴⁰⁷ *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 102-08. In retrospect, the likelihood of compensation taking place was questionable at best given the frequency with which Mexico and the Central American republics defaulted on their debts during the 19th century. Whether Gentz's plan would have provided enough political stability to bring their financial situations under control can only be speculated on.

monarchy (badly in need of such support) while also serving as a potential check on further revolutions in the ex-colonies. This would have the further advantage of bringing the British over to the Continental side, preserving the unity of the European powers.⁴⁰⁸

It was a thoughtful and promising plan from his perspective, one which, had it been implemented, might have turned out very creditably (if, admittedly, some of the emerging Latin American leaders had been willing to go along with it, and if they had been able to stabilize their new countries enough to put the scheme into operation). There was never much chance of it making its way into policy, though. Gentz had fewer contacts and means of influence there than elsewhere in Europe, and anyhow the Spanish government was unwilling to admit its colonies' independence until after there was no longer any chance of returning them to the fold. More to the point, Tsar Alexander, in his last years, had thrown his support behind an absolutist support of the monarchical system, and upheld Madrid's determination to restore control over the ex-colonies. Any hopes Gentz had had of a concerted solution by the powers of Europe, then, were dashed. He looked on unhappily as the situation in Latin America went from bad to worse, but it was neither his responsibility nor his main concern.

As neither he nor the Austrian Empire had any pressing interests in the Western Hemisphere, he had the freedom to be a bit flexible and innovative in casting about for a solution to the crisis there. A matter in which both Gentz and Austria were more directly concerned, though, was the changing situation in the Balkans. Since 1812, it will be remembered, Gentz had been regularly employed as a political correspondent with the ruler of the Ottoman vassal state of Wallachia—a job which also provided the bulk of his income from then on. The dispatches he

⁴⁰⁸ Gustav Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 106. Earlier, when addressing the problem of Portuguese-Brazilian relations, Gentz had argued in favor of a complete legal separation between the two, rather than maintaining some kind of quasi-colonial bond.

sent to the *hospodar* there were of inestimable value in explaining the state of European affairs in the 1810s and '20s; they also made him more attentive to events in that part of the continent. Chief among these, by 1823-24 at least, was the Greek question. Long-smoldering tensions along the Aegean had finally broken into open rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, a rebellion which severely tested the doctrine of legitimacy imposed at Vienna. The settlements laid down there had been based on two pillars: obedience to the powers that were, and defense of Christian Europe and its values. Gentz, for one, fervently insisted on both of these, despite his personal skepticism, and so far they had not been in conflict--the oft-cited "alliance of throne and altar."

But in Greece was a situation where that alliance was not so certain. The Greeks, after all, were a Christian people credited with giving birth to Western civilization, while their Turkish overlords were a Muslim power with a reputation for barbarity. Not only Romantic figures (notably Lord Byron of England) but also many men and women of conservative bent thought the Greek rebellion could be safely supported. This was an influential factor in many places, but especially in Russia, where the Tsar was inclined to support his fellow Orthodox Christians. At the same time, it could hardly be denied that the Greek revolt had definite revolutionary implications for the rest of Europe. The surviving German revolutionary organizations were extremely vocal in their support for the Greeks, as a proxy for their own struggle against authority, and this did not go unnoticed by Gentz or by Metternich. Nor did it escape their attention that Alexander, however much his religious sentiments played a role, was also being swayed by one of his Greek-born advisers, Ioannis Kapodistrias, who was far more open to liberal and nationalist ideas in his homeland and the rest of Europe.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ For more information on the European response to the Greek revolt, see David Brewer, *The Greek War for Independence* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2011), 137-44.

It seems clear that if Gentz had had his way, he would, from first to last, have scotched the idea of any outside assistance for the Greeks and supported the Ottoman Empire's claim to the territory. It did not matter that the Turks were not a Christian power; to admit exceptions to the principle of legitimacy was to destroy the principle itself. "I defend the integrity of the Ottoman Empire," he stated, "not only because I think I have plumbed the depths and the danger into which the destruction of this power would plunge Europe, but also, and perhaps more so, because of that sense of justice which does not allow me to have 'two weights and two measures.'" Indeed, he appears to have had from the first a positive antipathy for the Greeks and their cause, writing to Müller as early as 1821, "the Greeks, the old and the new, are disgusting to me in every conceivable respect. I know and read nothing of them except what immediate necessity requires." He also cast scorn on the common view of the Ottomans as purely despotic and fanatical, claiming Muslim states were far more tolerant of Jews and Christians than vice versa.⁴¹⁰ Such statements enraged public opinion in many European quarters and led to a fresh spate of ridicule and denunciation towards Gentz and Metternich.⁴¹¹ Unfazed as usual, the former had by the mid-1820s come to act, via his Wallachian connections, as a sort of unofficial adviser to the Ottoman sultan on the Greek question, his dispatches being sufficiently prized at Constantinople for the Turkish foreign minister to remark more than once, "What says my Gentz, my treasure?"⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ *Briefwechsel*, 356-57. Gentz's feelings towards both parties were in fact more mixed than this implies. He also wrote that the Greek revolt was in part the result of Turkish idiocy and "fanaticism," and suggested to Metternich that there might be a situation in which Austrian recognition of the Greeks was justifiable. The fact remained, though, that Turkish claims on southeastern Europe had long been recognized by international law, and any breach of that was dangerous.

⁴¹¹ *Lebenszeugnisse*, II, 534; Auszüge von Gentz als Salamé, "A Narrative of the Expedition to Algiers in the Year 1816," UB Köln Sammlung Otto Wolff G, N. Nr. 91.

⁴¹² *Aus dem Nachlasse Friedrich von Gentz*, II, 23.

What Gentz said, taking a page from his proposal for resolving the rebellion in Latin America, was that Austria and other powers ought to mediate the situation, reaching toward some kind of settlement that would address Greek grievances and perhaps allow an element of autonomy, but leave Turkish dominion over its European provinces intact. He was motivated not only by the desire to defend the legitimacy principle, but also by the fear that if an open war broke out between the two, Russia would intervene on the side of the Greeks, perhaps gaining in the process its long-sought access to the Mediterranean, and thus strengthen its position in Eastern Europe still further. On top of that, war in the Balkans endangered his relationship with the Wallachian *hospodar*, a relationship whose severing would be financially disastrous for Gentz. For all these reasons, he argued passionately in favor of peace, and preferably a pro-Turkish peace.

In the end, of course, Gentz did not, in fact, have his way. Even Metternich had gradually come to the conclusion that expedience was called for in Greece; Russia was adamant; and as Gentz grimly observed in a letter to one of his English acquaintances, between the 1827 naval victory at Navarino and the change of governments in 1827-28, Britain was not in a position or a mood to hold the line.⁴¹³ The ultimate outcome of the revolt, of course, was the Turks' bowing to British and Russian pressure and recognizing an independent Greek state. (Kapodistrias, chosen to be its first prime minister, was promptly assassinated.)

Though Gentz might have taken Kapodistrias' fate as proof of the dangers of a mass movement, the overall situation was hardly one to please him. Despite his wishes, the legitimacy principle could not be upheld everywhere. It was a bitter disappointment, and from a personal perspective, the results were as bad as he had feared; as a side effect of the war, Wallachia

⁴¹³ *Gesammelte Schriften*, IX, 238.

became a client state of Russia rather than Austria, thus ending Gentz's position as a correspondent of the *hospodar*, and from 1828 until his death his financial affairs, which had never really improved since his Berlin days, became ever more precarious. Indeed, he only avoided total insolvency thanks to loans from the Rothschild family in return for services on their behalf (which lent itself to the later stories that he himself was Jewish).

Interested as he might be in preserving the principles of the Restoration in the farther reaches of the Western world, Gentz always reserved the bulk of his attention for how it might be upheld in Central Europe especially. His efforts to preserve the status of the Vienna Congress and the Karlsbad Decrees show, yet again, the complex ideological changes he had gone through in the last three decades. Having endorsed freedom of the press on the accession of Friedrich Wilhelm III, he was now particularly anxious that the German publications remain tightly controlled. "Our strongest and most energetic fight must be directed against the *overpowerfulness of the press* [*italics original*]," he wrote to Metternich in 1825, and informed Pilat the following year, "I therefore consider a censor, at once strong and skillfully organized, as the first of all our spiritual and political needs."⁴¹⁴

How far Gentz really approved of the Austrian state's intense policing measures, against which even loyal intellectuals chafed, is hard to say. He had his limits; towards the very end of his life he was (semi-) confidentially telling Metternich's critics that the whole thing had gone too far, that his boss spied on everyone and trusted no one. "Every expression of opinion that by the widest stretch of the imagination smacks of deviation from the 'correct' is damned and treated with incomparable intolerance," he complained in a letter not long before his death.⁴¹⁵ Part of his grievance came from moments in the past when these policing measures had been

⁴¹⁴ *Briefe von und an Gentz*, III, pt. 2, 164; *Briefe von Pilat*, II, 203.

⁴¹⁵ August Fournier, "Gentz," in *Der Friede*, III, 514.

used against him personally. Ever since entering Austrian service, and regardless of the valuable services he performed, Gentz was watched by imperial agents, and reports on his conduct were regularly handed over to Metternich.⁴¹⁶ In time, such behavior became part of the critical stereotype of the Austrian state--it did not even trust its own supporters--but it never led Gentz to question the utility of the political police as such. He knew well enough that his own mail was often intercepted and opened, and this irritated him. But his objections were based on degree, not on principle. The above remarks seem to indicate that he was not fundamentally opposed to a politically active press in the German states, but rather one with too much influence, one which had to be restrained lest it upset the precarious balance of the Confederation.

However much alacrity there was in his support for press censorship, though, he was also aware that this by itself would not be enough. All the proscriptions in the world could not eradicate revolutionary ideas, once they were out there, a point he emphasized to Metternich. As an old veteran of the battle for public opinion, Gentz knew that positive propaganda, which could win the active loyalty of the common man, was just as important as silencing dissenting voices, if not more so. True victory for the conservative camp could only come through the reestablishment of “the moral as well as the material preponderance of authority,” as he put it.⁴¹⁷ Since at least 1817, therefore, Gentz had taken serious interest in a more constructive policy where the press was concerned. He had seen how the Tories in Britain had responded to radical publications like the *Edinburgh Review* by setting up an opposing paper, the *Quarterly Review*, and had notions that something similar might be done in Austria. In addition to the

⁴¹⁶ These became less frequent after 1815, but increased again in Gentz’s final years, as his relationship with Metternich cooled.

⁴¹⁷ *Gentz an Pilat*, II, 153.

Österreichische Beobachter, run by Pilat, Gentz obtained Metternich's approval to set up the *Wiener Jahrbücher* in 1819 as a periodical that would defend the government and its principles.

By 1822 Gentz was going further. Seeing that Catholic political journalism was coming into its own as a coherent force, and perhaps influenced somewhat by the ideas of Joseph de Maistre, whose work he was only just now beginning to read, he took under his wing the young journalist Johann Baptist von Pfeilschifter and saw to it that he received financial support from the Austrian government for his efforts to promote a "Catholic conservatism" that would counter the revolutionary principles astir in Germany and promote an active loyalty to the Habsburg realm.⁴¹⁸ He also sketched plans, at various points in the 1820s, for a reform of Austrian education that would achieve the same object. As the emperor and others in high places showed little interest in his plans, Gentz never fleshed these out or explained how they would work, but he continued to urge that something be done to cultivate actual enthusiasm for the established order.⁴¹⁹

Whether the suggestions Gentz put forth, such as they were, would have made a significant difference in the future of the Austrian state is of course uncertain. In the event, most of the ruling elite, there and in the other German states, did not consider it worthwhile to pursue such goals, usually being content with intensive policing and an insistence on monarchical prerogative. A few, most notably Württemberg, went so far as to shield liberal press outlets. Their lack of interest was frustrating: "The real reason why no effective literary opposition can be made to the revolutionary party in Germany," Gentz wrote to Pfeilschifter in 1823, "is that no German government will gather a proper number of competent men who might form such an

⁴¹⁸ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 252-55.

⁴¹⁹ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 275-76.

opposition. This would be the only means.”⁴²⁰ Had the emperor, for one, been more receptive to the plan and begun what we today would call an intense public-relations campaign, it might well have been a positive asset for the regime, in the core territories and even beyond. Though no one could yet know it, the Revolution of 1848 was to prove that the still-mostly rural population of Central Europe was a powerful force for conservatism, provided the rulers could mobilize it. Had Gentz’s ideas proved a viable means of mobilization, the Habsburg empire might well have been a more stable position during the latter part of the nineteenth century, at least in the core territories.⁴²¹ The fact that most peasants within the empire were illiterate was, to be sure, a complicating factor, but had the more privileged and educated elements been won over, there would have been a significant trickle-down effect on the morale of the rest. In any case, these proposals also reveal his awareness of the changed political realities of the post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic world: in the realm of ideas, sovereignty now rested with the people, rather than the monarchs. This was less obvious on paper, perhaps, given how many states in Europe remained monarchies, but very few of them—not Austria, maybe not even Russia—could stay stable without some effort to win public opinion to the side of throne and altar.

What Gentz does not seem to have foreseen, by contrast, was the way in which the *vox populi* would be magnified and transformed by the progress of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, he was among the very last political thinkers in Europe who could avoid confronting the impact it was already having. Few of his letters make any reference to the burgeoning factories and urban centers in Britain and in concentrated pockets on the Continent. Gentz was a man of the

⁴²⁰ *Stadt- und Landesbibliothek*, Vienna, No. 19592.

⁴²¹ And not necessarily only there. It is often forgotten that even in the peripheral regions of the Habsburg realm, later to be the site of such virulent nationalist movements, there existed a great deal of latent loyalty to the emperor, right up to World War I. During the revolutionary upheaval of 1846, Polish gentry in Galicia tried to win their tenants to the cause of a Polish national rebellion; the peasants not only refused but denounced and attacked the revolutionaries, declaring themselves not rebels but loyal Austrian subjects.

eighteenth century, not the nineteenth; he “accepted the new leaders in the financial world without reflection...but when he had to look at the new industrial machinery, he did not bother to suppress his yawn.”⁴²² Not that he shut his eyes to the changes happening around him; he certainly knew of the stirrings of industrial unrest in England and appreciated its potential challenges. But it was not an issue near and dear to his heart, if the minimal amount of writing from him on the subject is any indication. Had he lived in Britain or France or Holland, certainly he would have dealt with the problem of industrialism; but in Austria in the 1820s, it was still just possible to disregard the phenomenon—and this was unquestionably more congenial to Gentz. The sprawling megalopolis, the proletariat, trade unionism—a man so wholly a product of the Old Regime would not have been comfortable addressing any of these issues.

Even so, by his later years the “social problem” was inescapable even close to home. In 1830, as a new storm of revolution broke, he admitted in a letter to Pilat that the “incurable misery of the lower classes” was now the greatest danger to the conservative order in Austria.⁴²³ He had no systematic proposals for addressing this “misery,” and in fact actively opposed thorough reforms; but he expected that some kind of social conflict, even upheaval, was inevitable. It sometimes appears from his correspondence, in fact, that Gentz, as the 1820s progressed, was dimly aware of the transition to a new era of history for which he was not suited. There is the letter with which this chapter began, and there is an 1828 letter to a past

⁴²² Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 276-77. As an example of what Gentz *did* have to say about industry and labor issues, there is an 1819 letter to Pilat, complaining of a new article in the *Beobachter* about the grievances of factory workers in Manchester, England: “What in the world could have moved you to have that damned address of the Manchester factory workers reprinted in the *Beobachter*?...[Metternich] declares that this article is one of the most seditious to appear in a public paper for a long time. And what devil led you so far astray as to add the malicious note: “There are fifteen thousand of these *fortunate men*”? Don’t you ever stop to consider what sort of an impression this sort of thing must make on the people of Vienna, and how little it behooves us to help spread such complaints (which are perhaps entirely without basis)?” The implication is that Gentz was concerned less with the facts themselves than the effect they might have on his and Metternich’s agenda. *Briefe an Pilat*, I, 341.

⁴²³ *Briefe an Pilat*, II, 307, 320.

acquaintance of his, Amalie von Helvig, reading in part: “World history is an eternal transition from the old to the new. In the continuous rotation of things everything destroys itself, and the fruit that has grown to ripeness detaches itself from the plant that brought it forth...this rotation will lead to the rapid downfall of everything existing.” Other biographers have noted that while he continued to uphold Metternich-style conservatism in print during this period, the old zeal was lacking; he kept up the fight simply because, as he also said in the letter to Amalie, “only a bad soldier leaves his colors.”⁴²⁴

Certainly, a factor in his cooling was his disapproval of figures who he felt had moved too far to the right. This was especially true in France, where the *ultras* had taken over after Charles X came to the throne in 1824. Gentz was very supportive of their dominance, and their repression of liberal policies; but he suspected at times that these measures were only staving off future upheavals. By the end of Charles’ reign, he had become increasingly critical, arguing that the government’s excessive crackdown on its opponents was practically inviting a revolt.⁴²⁵ Another factor, too, was simply old age. Gentz turned sixty the year Charles took the throne; unlike Metternich, he was now definitely past the prime of life, and had less and less energy for ideological battles. Living at his Weinhaus villa outside the capital, he passed the time surrounded by creature comforts and rarely ventured out into the social scene anymore.

Just how far Gentz had mellowed was revealed by a letter to an Austrian officer, Major Prokesch von Osten in the early months of 1830, in reference to the interminable Greek question. Somewhat surprisingly, he had (evidently successfully) discouraged Prince Philip of Hesse from acceding to Austrian and English plans to make him King of Greece, arguing not only that differences of religion made the choice impolitic, but that Greece was not suited to be a

⁴²⁴ Gustav Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 319-22.

⁴²⁵ *Briefe von Gentz an Pilat*, II, 267, 292.

monarchy at all. “Why a prince? Why a sovereign?” he asked. “Greece is cut out to be a republic, because of its geographical situation, because of its physical construction, the character of its inhabitants, its present poverty, and because of all its antecedents.”⁴²⁶ In truth, this was not a contradiction of the principles he had espoused since the 1790s: experience and practical considerations ought to determine a state’s constitution; but rarely had he applied this maxim in opposition to monarchy, especially during his time as Metternich’s right-hand man. What it really sounded like was an abandonment of his brief status as a reactionary at the time of Karlsbad, and a reversion to the days of his youth, when he had unabashedly based his arguments on Enlightenment values, on the constitutional writings of Montesquieu, Mirabeau, and others.

It was inevitable that this moderation would affect his standing with Metternich and the rest of the Austrian government. During the early 1820s in particular, Gentz and Metternich had had an especially close relationship. They worked together on a daily basis; the prince would tell him the basic points of an intended policy, and he would take it from there, making up the details out of his own head. It may not have been true, as some have argued, that what has been called “Metternich’s system” might more properly be called the “Gentzian system,” but there was certainly a great deal of his spirit in it.⁴²⁷ Though their association never ceased to have a hierarchical quality about it, Metternich long considered Gentz indispensable, and almost a part of his family, if in something of a servant position. By the late 1820s, though, these friendly ties were becoming strained--though never completely broken. Gentz felt that the prince had become too reflexively reactionary, rather than acting in a practical, genuinely conservative manner. For his part, Metternich believed his assistant had fallen under the sway of the political liberals and was letting his old unreliability show; moreover, his taking such an independent line could be

⁴²⁶ Anton Graf Prokesch von Osten, *Briefwechsel mit Gentz und Metternich*, I, 325-26.

⁴²⁷ Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz*, 223.

seen as a betrayal of a man who was effectively his patron. Metternich would never cut off their relationship, but there is no doubt that the level of trust and warmth that had existed between them suffered.⁴²⁸

Despite this, the last years of Gentz's life were not unhappy ones. His financial affairs were as unstable as ever, owing to the severing of his connections with Wallachia after the latest Turkish war, and Metternich had to repeatedly ask the emperor for monetary gifts and salary increases on his behalf. The credit made available to him by the Rothschilds helped some, but not enough, and on his death most of his property had to be auctioned to pay debts. Nonetheless, while he lived he maintained the comfortable lifestyle to which he was accustomed. Moreover, he enjoyed a level of romantic happiness (albeit of a controversial kind) to which he was not accustomed at all: in 1829 he made the acquaintance of a young Viennese dancer, Frances (Fanny) Elssler, then participating in the ballet at the city's Kärntnertor Theater, and the two began a serious courtship that might well have ended in marriage had Gentz pressed it. It was the epitome of a May-December union; he was sixty-five at the time, she was nineteen. This, plus the degree of infatuation Gentz publicly displayed toward her, and her reputation in some circles as a rather loose young woman (she was known to have already had a child out of wedlock), made their dalliance an unseemly one in the eyes of Viennese society, with powerful men all the way up to the emperor making their disapproval known. It may have been for this reason that Gentz ultimately did not propose marriage; in any case, there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of his affection for her, acting alternately as a lover and a paternal figure who encouraged her education, or her own for him; and they remained close to the end of his life.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Alan Palmer, *Metternich*, 254.

⁴²⁹ Their relationship is described in August Ehrhard, *Fanny Elssler: Das Leben einer Tänzerin* (Munich, 1910), 1-21.

It was a counterpoint to his increasingly difficult relationship with Metternich. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, things continued to deteriorate, with the two no longer seeing eye-to-eye on most things. The two saw each other as constantly as ever, Gentz coming to the prince's residence almost every day, but it increasingly seemed to members of Metternich's household that the two met just to argue. During these final years, therefore, Metternich did not give him any important assignments; he judged that the differences between them were too great for further substantial collaboration, though he continued, as he later said, to value their relationship.⁴³⁰

The breakdown in their partnership coincided roughly with that of the Restoration they had helped shape. The Revolution of 1830, often overshadowed in retrospect by the flashier affairs of 1789 and 1848, was nonetheless a major shock to Europeans at all levels, especially to those who had crafted the post-war settlements. Charles X, champion of the *ultra* party in France, had been toppled and sent into exile in the space of a few days. Aging icons, like the Marquis de Lafayette, were public figures once more, and Gentz's old acquaintance, Louis Philippe, was ushered into power as the "Bourgeois King." Elsewhere in Europe, three separate revolts—in Belgium, in Poland, in Rome—followed in short order, though only the first of these was successful. Throughout the continent, it was a worrisome time to be an elite. Reaction had not achieved a decisive victory, after all; the *demos* was on the move once again, perhaps setting the stage for another battle between revolution and counter-revolution.

⁴³⁰ Metternich to Anton Graf Prokesch von Osten, June 15, 1832, *Nachlass des Grafen Prokesch-Osten*, II, 119. Günther Kronenbitter remarks that this decline in his political activity suggests "that Gentz possessed political weight only with, not against, Metternich's will." This is not entirely true, given his lengthy and productive career before Metternich's rise to prominence, but it does indicate the degree of the latter's power by now. *Wort und Macht*, 43.

At least that was how it seemed to Metternich and some others when a full account of events from Paris reached Austria at the beginning of August that year. Gentz did not see it so. He still had fond memories of Louis Philippe, whom he had desired to be king after Napoleon's ouster, judging him far more practical and insightful than Louis XVIII or Charles X. True, it was most regrettable that he had come to the throne in this way, but invoking the agreements and alliances of Vienna and using force to restore Charles, as Metternich seemed bent on doing for a while, was not the proper reaction. "Right is arrayed against wrong; prudence against urgency," Gentz wrote to his old associate, urging him to let things be. "A revolution is never right, but once necessity has brought it about its decrees must be accepted." He added that if Louis Philippe proved himself a bad king, the situation would work itself out, for he was now beholden to the same forces that had raised him up.⁴³¹

That December, Gentz expanded his thoughts in an open letter to Baron James Rothschild, in hopes that the latter and his contacts in the new French government would use them to calm European opinion and conciliate the other powers to Louis Philippe. In many ways, it is a remarkable document, considering the source. Gentz, who at the midpoint of his career had been the arch-reactionary, was now striving to prevent any retaliation against France by the conservative powers. The new French government, he stressed, was exceedingly moderate, had no expansionist aims, and was just as eager to avoid war and a return to republicanism and ideological conflict as the rest of Europe. Similarly, the independence movement in Belgium, while inadvisable at the start, now had to be recognized as a *fait accompli*, and in any case it posed no threat to the overall balance of power. There was, Gentz continued, no existing political issue in Europe that could not be peacefully resolved. "The danger of war," he wrote, "lies...in

⁴³¹ *Briefe an Pilat*, II, 303-04.

the impotent titillation a few ministers get from displaying this aversion [to the new French government] at every opportunity, in the idle threats...in all the boastful demonstrations with which one thinks to impress or frighten France, but instead only irritates France and demoralizes one's own subjects."⁴³² One wonders if he had Metternich in mind when penning these lines.

Most of this was not much different from what Gentz had advocated during the last decade or two, and could be commended as cautious, conservative statesmanship. It was his outlook on the general picture in Europe that was truly surprising, especially with reference to one of the principles he had spilled so much ink for in the last two decades. "An idea prevails among the masses...that in Europe today and, indeed, throughout the civilized world, there are two diametrically opposed systems of thought (generally called Legitimism, and Popular-Sovereignty) and that sooner or later, preferably sooner, the supremacy of one or the other must be determined by force of arms." Without directly passing judgment on either of these systems, he dismissed the notion of a final reckoning between them as a blind and destructive fantasy, the more so as it was disproven day by day. "When we seek counsel in history we find that Great Britain, a constitutional monarchy, has lived for a hundred years in friendship and close association with purely monarchical states...Catholicism and Protestantism, thought to be as far asunder as the two poles, can live peacefully together after a hundred years of bloody strife, not only on the same continent but in the same country, and in the same town." If the religious sectarianism of past centuries had cooled, so too could its current political equivalent. Moreover, "Are we so certain of victory that we [meaning the Legitimists] cannot do better than to push forward the day of decision?" Or would it be better to preserve one's forces, keep house as best

⁴³² *Aus dem Nachlass von Gentz*, II, 229-30.

as possible, hope for a more favorable day, make one last show, “and if this be lost, close our books”? The point was obvious. Europe could choose cooperation or war.⁴³³

This, then, was Gentz in 1830. There was no need to worry about a new revolution in France. Ideological wars were folly, especially for conservatives, since they would probably lose anyway. In such a vein, he simultaneously advocated the granting of greater autonomy to Poland and opposed any further tightening of the Karlsbad Decrees, as Metternich wanted, though in neither issue was he heavily involved.

It was Gentz’s last real contribution to, and commentary on, the political situation in Europe. It also showed how far he had come since the heady days of the 1790s. The positions that Gentz in his middle sixties advocated would have been all but anathema to Gentz at thirty or so; but a thread connected them. Though he had on occasion taken up a reactionary position, he had never been truly at home on that wing; more often than not, he had been willing to concede ground to the opposition in order to defend the essentials as he saw them: peace among nations, ordered liberty (in the Continental rather than Anglophile sense), gradual social and material progress. Undoubtedly he had mellowed since his youth—he lacked his earlier fire and knew it. But one gets the sense that if he regarded his accomplishments as temporary in the grand scheme of things, he was yet proud of what he had managed.

The fallout from the July Revolution and related events continued to occupy the Austrian government for some time, and the same was true of Gentz, who well into the spring of 1832 kept up a voluminous correspondence with his diplomatic contacts on events in Italy, France, Prussia, and elsewhere. By April, however, his letters reveal that he was in his final decline. Why it came now, no one could say for certain; Metternich said later that his spirit had been exhausted

⁴³³ *Aus dem Nachlasse von Gentz*, II, 236.

by his ongoing relationship with Fanny Elssler, but Golo Mann thought it was really simpler than that: he thought he had lived long enough, and would not dishonor himself with old age.⁴³⁴ Many of his oldest friends and acquaintances had already departed the scene; Goethe had died early that year and Adam Müller back in 1829, and the melancholy this produced may have hastened the end. In any case, his health worsened considerably over the course of the spring, though he continued to keep up his social correspondence and to send and receive letters on the political situation. On May 12, for example, he wrote to an unknown correspondent regarding secret negotiations by the exiled Duke Karl of Brunswick to regain some of his lost property, an affair for which Gentz had lent his services for a small fee—a fitting summation for a large part of his career.⁴³⁵ He tried to keep up his routine, but in his final letter, on May 30, he confessed to being in a very poor state of health, for which he blamed his physicians, and admitted, “I do not know how and when I shall be able to regain my strength.”⁴³⁶ By that time he was confined to his bed, and his doctor complained that he would not take the medicines prescribed to him, as Princess Metternich recorded in her diary. Requests from herself and her husband that he make an effort to recover were ignored.⁴³⁷ Around nine in the morning of June 9, 1832, the day after these incidents were recorded, Friedrich Gentz died. He was sixty-eight years old.

⁴³⁴ Metternich to Prokesch von Osten; Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 305-06.

⁴³⁵ Schlesier, *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 340.

⁴³⁶ Gentz to Carl Leiden (unpublished), Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, Vienna.

⁴³⁷ Metternich, *Nachgelassene Papiere*, V, 231-32.

Conclusion

I made my choice in my twenty-fifth year. Already fascinated by the new German philosophy and also, no doubt, by some apparent new disclosures in the field of political science, which in those days, however, was still very unfamiliar to me, I recognized my mission clearly and distinctly with the outbreak of the French Revolution. I first felt, and later knew, that because of the talents and abilities that nature had reposed in me I had been called as a champion of the establishment, and a foe to innovations. Neither my station in life, my circumstances and expectations at the time, my manner of living, nor any sort of natural or acquired prejudice, nor any worldly interest, determined this choice. All my earlier political articles were written at a time when, wholly limited to reading and studying, I had not the slightest connection with any important political figure, either within my native land or beyond. That some of these articles should have made my name known in higher circles was only natural.

-Gentz, 1827⁴³⁸

When it comes to the matter of posterity, writers have not been kind to Friedrich Gentz. Paul Sweet's biography ends on a truly dismal note: "He haunts the pages of the historical treatises, and his figure...lingers haltingly, as though unwilling to join the host on the road to oblivion. But his name gradually fades from the memories of men." Golo Mann concurs: "The usual measure of a politician is his achievements, and none of Gentz's outlived him." To be sure, they are only repeating the remarks of those who knew him best. His acquaintance Major Prokesch, after picking up a watch and some glassware from an auction of Gentz's estate, wrote in his diary, "The man whom I esteemed most highly in life was full of weaknesses: Gentz. He was so thoroughly *human!* I can think of nothing better to say of him."⁴³⁹ The general conclusion one reaches is of a life that was eventful and exciting, yet somehow lived in vain.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 319-20.

⁴³⁹ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 307-8.

⁴⁴⁰ The spacious residence in which Gentz spent his final years and died, Währinger Strasse 189-191, is now a furniture store on the ground floor and apartments above. He was buried in the Währingerhof not far

There is no doubt that Gentz himself shared this view on occasion, especially toward the end of his life. He was sometimes given to despair, worrying that the cause he had given his career to was ultimately doomed anyway, as the passages previously quoted indicate. Certainly by the early 1830s, if not before, there were ample reasons for pessimism about the conservative order he had labored to construct. Part of his discouragement, though, also stemmed from the fact that that order had never truly been his to construct. He had accomplished much in his life, moving up into the second rank of European political figures: but there was never any chance of advancing to the very top. By the nature of the Old Regime power structures he defended, Gentz could not make policy; he could only advise and then put others' decisions in the best light possible through his abilities as a writer and publicist. His talents in that field were very real, and widely acknowledged by those above him, but as a commoner, positions like that of government minister were out of his reach. Not only that, but the hierarchical society he supported often resulted in his being regarded as an inferior. Metternich, most notably, real as the friendship was between them, and much as he admitted his dependence on Gentz, could and did treat him as a personal valet: a highly-esteemed valet, to be sure, but a valet nonetheless.⁴⁴¹

None of this means that Gentz was ultimately an irrelevant figure. That was the most visible mark he left on the world, but one should also consider his career as a literary combatant of the French Revolution and the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Gentz certainly could not claim much of the credit for the triumph of the established order over these (if indeed it was triumph, in the case of the Revolution); that fight was chiefly waged with muskets and cannons, not words. Yet the period 1789-1815 did see the first ideological war in the modern world, in which the

away. In 1909, Vienna named a street for him, Gentzgasse, which runs through a mostly middle- and working-class neighborhood in the city's northwest sector.

⁴⁴¹ See Metternich's occasional pranks on Gentz, which Gentz could not reciprocate, and Metternich's use of him to arrange matters with the Duchess of Sagan and other mistresses; Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

mood of the public sphere, and therefore those who acted upon it, were important as never before. Gentz crafted no original political philosophy, produced no brilliant refutation of the revolutionary principles; but he did land a number of telling blows against those principles and their implications, partly by broadening the circulation of more elevated critics like Burke and Mallet du Pan, partly through his own insights into revolutionary naiveté and solipsism. Contemporary observers in Germany were in no doubt about the significance of some of his activities, especially of his translation of Burke, for the political scene there. A generation later, Friedrich Schlegel would say of *Reflections*: “Burke, that consummate statesman and orator, shed abroad over the whole of Europe, and....Germany especially, a copious store of political sagacity and moral experience drawn from the primitive source of all political wisdom. He was the deliverer of his age when it was involved in the storms of revolution.” As far as Germany was concerned, Gentz was the vessel through which this effect was wrought, and Burke’s success was his success.⁴⁴²

During the Napoleonic Wars, moreover, his constant refrain of the principle of legitimacy and the necessity of powers acting in concert to defeat Bonaparte could hardly be said to have turned the tide in and of itself, but it was certainly heard in the capitals of Europe, and it provided France’s enemies with reasons to continue fighting. Events constantly vindicated his refrain that only a true international coalition, playing by new rules, would be able to defeat their enemy; the lesson was a long time being learned by the Allied sovereigns, but the unity achieved in 1813-15 was the fruit of this work (by himself and others). However little it may have been appreciated at the time by his Austrian masters, he also severely punctured Bonaparte’s claims to be “ending” the Revolution and attempts to be seen as one among the many monarchs of Europe.

⁴⁴² *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1889), 329. See also F. Braune, *Edmund Burke in Deutschland* (Heidelberg, 1917).

Certainly in Britain, at least, part of what sustained the war effort was the belief that the man was in fact a Jacobin carrying the *Encyclopédie* to all of his new conquests. Not for nothing, then, did the emperor curse Gentz's name and consider him one of the most dangerous men in Germany.⁴⁴³

The peak of his career and significance, without a doubt, came at the Congress following Napoleon's downfall. As unhappy as he might have been with the outcome, the peace settlement at Vienna was to a certain extent his accomplishment, and it was quite an accomplishment—no general European war was to break out for a century, thanks to the provisions he had helped draft. Although he made none of the most crucial decisions at that Congress, at least not unilaterally, the form it took and the principles it espoused—balance of powers, international consultations, buffer states—had all been consistently advocated by him for over twenty years. This was due chiefly to the atmosphere of general opinion among the great powers, but Gentz had done more than anyone to create that atmosphere, and done it longer. At the very least, it can be said that he prevented the Congress from becoming a punitive anti-French gathering—no mean feat, or without consequences for the future.

There is no doubt that his frequent relegation to the footnotes of history stems in part from the disagreeable impression many scholars have had of him, especially in the century or so after his death, when it seemed obvious that the world was progressing toward the liberal democratic nation-state. As has been shown, his relationship with German nationalism was highly complicated, and there were some, especially those in favor of a *Grossdeutsch* state that

⁴⁴³ This fact was appreciated and attested to by others. George Canning, for example, wrote to a colleague in 1809, "I am rather a believer in Gentz; though I know he is very much distrusted by many people – and though I admit him to be an enthusiast – somewhat profligate – and a great spendthrift. He is and has always been in good political principles: and has this certain recommendation and guarantee for his sincerity, that he would infallibly be shot, if Buonaparte should catch him." George Canning to Earl Bathurst, in Historical Manuscripts Collection, 128.

would balance Austria against Prussia, who preferred to highlight his patriotic tones. One of the earliest efforts came from Gentz's illegitimate son, Josef Gentz (1805-1875). A writer and sometime member of the Austrian government like his father, Josef published a brief sketch of the man and his ideas in 1861, *Friedrich Gentz und die heutige Politik*. Emphasizing the years up to 1812 as much as possible (and those afterward as little as possible), he contended that Gentz had been practically the only man in all of Germany to keep the flame of resistance to Napoleon burning after Austerlitz and Jena, and that he alone had seen Austro-Prussian cooperation as the path to German greatness.⁴⁴⁴

Like Friedrich, though, Josef was generally opposed to any kind of radicalism, and as a good Austrian was hardly an ardent nationalist himself; so he found little to condemn in his father's career. Outside the Habsburg Empire, those who bothered to study Gentz were, as a rule, far less kind, especially if they hailed from the historical school then flourishing in most of Germany, which saw Prussia as the agent of national unity and progress. Someone like Gentz, who had set his face firmly against those ideals and done so much to frustrate their realization in Germany, was hardly a man to admire, then; and this may have had something to do with the charges that he was an opportunist and a social climber, nothing more. The great historian Heinrich von Treitschke, though not unadmiring, could not but denounce this turncoat Prussian in his writings.⁴⁴⁵

Although this interpretation of Gentz as a dishonest trimmer has hardly vanished from the academic community, the undermining of the nationalist, progressive narrative has had an impact, and treatments of Gentz in the last generation or so have tended to be more balanced and appreciative of what he strove to accomplish. Harro Zimmermann, writing the most recent

⁴⁴⁴ Josef Gentz, *Friedrich Gentz und die heutige Politik* (Vienna: Josef Klemm, 1861), 8-9, 12, 15-19.

⁴⁴⁵ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Deutschland im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1927).

German biography, has been downright positive in depicting him as an early practitioner of *Realpolitik*: “Considering what a disastrous battering subsequent German history took from the temptation of the absolute (Hagen Schulze), the cool-headed political pathos of Friedrich Gentz belongs to the best stock of our democratic tradition.”⁴⁴⁶

At the end of the day, of course, Gentz is interesting primarily for his place within the German conservative tradition. The fact that his name has so often been aligned with Burke’s has understandably led to his being pointed to as the founder of that tradition; yet as these pages have demonstrated, that is not entirely true. Traditionalists like Justus Möser were equally influential in their way; so too were those of a more romantic inclination like Adam Müller, Friedrich Schlegel, and others. There were points of contact between the thought of these men and Gentz’s own, but he stood all along in a separate camp. A conservative tradition would have sprung up in Germany without him, though it clearly would have been much different.

Determining his place within German conservatism is also made difficult by the philosophical shifts he frequently made. The phrase “moving target” often seems applicable when trying to categorize his politics. An enthusiast of the Revolution, he soon established himself as one of its greatest enemies; a bitter hater of Napoleon, he could by 1814 almost have welcomed the survival of the “Corsican ogre”; an early proponent of German unity, he came to oppose any appearance of nationalist sentiment; a defender of legitimacy, one of his last acts was to warn against an attack on the July Revolution. Although not capricious or easily changeable, the evolution of his thought is clearly observable. Even so, some assumptions or values remained constant with him.

⁴⁴⁶ Harro Zimmermann, *Friedrich Gentz. Die Erfindung der Realpolitik* (Paderborn: 2012).

Most importantly, a great gap lay between Gentz and many other conservatives. As with most ideological labels, “conservatism” is a catch-all title that means different things under different circumstances. The word itself did not exist as a political concept during Burke’s lifetime, and only appeared in that context toward the end of Gentz’s career. It can be reformist or traditionalist, Christian or secular, statist or libertarian. In the broadest possible view, some commonalities can be observed--most importantly, a respect for tradition and a desire to preserve as much of the status quo as possible in response to new conditions; but the means, and even some of the first principles, are rarely if ever unanimously agreed on. Hence, scholars have often separated this ideology into separate strains usually in agreement but sometimes in conflict with one another. This is as true for Germany as anywhere else. Klaus Epstein, for instance, argued that it contained a status quo, a reformist, and a reactionary tradition; though he did not give a great deal of attention to Gentz, one would have to place him within the reformist tradition, assuming this typology is valid.⁴⁴⁷ Other commentators, such as Jörn Garber and Günther Kronenbitter, have defined the proto-conservative movement around 1800 (or at least a large portion of it) as “rational conservatism” (similar to Epstein’s reform-conservatism), in that it eschews a romantic view of the state in history in favor of one that stresses the state’s historical development as a legal arrangement between multiple social communities. Political ideas such as “progress” and “equality” are attainable, if at all, only through agreements and concessions between these groups or through the actions of the monarch, not through wholesale revolution.⁴⁴⁸ If this is a proper interpretation of early German conservatism, it undoubtedly applies to Gentz.

His position within German conservatism was also defined by the fact that he did, in essence, remain a product of the Enlightenment, endorsing a view of the state and society that

⁴⁴⁷ Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, 19-24.

⁴⁴⁸ Günther Kronenbitter, *Wort und Macht*, 353-65.

stressed rationality, balance, and a degree of internationalism. There were times when he broke with this tradition: most notably during the Napoleonic Wars, when he flirted with the sort of romantic nationalism being put forth by Fichte and others. Gentz never really belonged to this tradition, though, as was made plain during the Restoration era, when he joined in the effort to crack down on any form of revolutionary nationalism in Germany. There was always a tension in his struggle against such movements as this, however, for his enemies shared his intellectual origins to an extent, something he only obliquely acknowledged. Golo Mann, toward the end of his biography, has a thought-provoking observation on Gentz and his basic assumptions about the world, one borne out by a careful examination of his writings:

It is to be emphasized that Gentz accepted in all its essentials the historical concept of the revolutionaries. Both he and the Revolution were children of the eighteenth century, the century in which the future was joyfully anticipated as never before and never afterward. He had not abandoned the idea of the future as the beginning of something fundamentally new; it was only that his joy in it had perceptibly diminished. Nevertheless, he could still view it in his more cheerful moments with a certain amount of optimism... When he was in a more gloomy mood he doubted that the great change would be beneficial in any way, but never denied its inevitability.⁴⁴⁹

The statement puts one in mind of Koselleck's description of the eighteenth century as the watershed era in which Western civilization substituted the future for the past as its point of reference.⁴⁵⁰ In this respect, the differences between Gentz and such men as Burke and De Maistre become much clearer. Burke took the Glorious Revolution and the "ancient" English constitution as his guide; De Maistre harkened back to the structure of medieval Christendom (or at least what he imagined that structure to be). Gentz could not look to any such model, not only because of different historical circumstances but because of temperament. Not only was he a

⁴⁴⁹ Mann, *Secretary of Europe*, 283.

⁴⁵⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 146.

product of Frederician Prussia, a model of enlightened absolutism and centralization, he never entirely left the mental world of the *Aufklärung*, of Kant and Rousseau. He was, and remained, a man of the Enlightenment, and that meant putting everything—political organization, social relations, etc.—on a rational basis, rejecting everything that did not fit.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the strain of conservatism he adopted because of these perspectives—alternately called reformist, rationalist, or governmental conservatism—was of a very different type from what many of his associates were advocating. Mann’s analysis fits well with the conclusions of another historian, Johann Christoph Allmeyer-Beck, on what he calls “*gouvernementalen Konservatismus*.” In his opinion, its roots are, strictly speaking, not conservative at all: “They stem from the eighteenth century, from the mental world of the Enlightenment and rationalism...Founded on the principles of legitimacy and authority, the state is less a living embodiment of the people than a social mechanism for the preservation of social and later national equilibrium.”⁴⁵¹ Such a philosophy is conservative in that it strives to preserve the existing social hierarchy, but it has no interest in the political decentralization which gave rise to that hierarchy.

It is tempting to draw a more tenuous conclusion here. For over a century, one of the more simplistic means of distinguishing Left from Right is the question of the size of government—typically, conservatives have a reputation for desiring a smaller state footprint than do their ideological opponents (especially, but not only, in America). When one examines European events of the early and mid-nineteenth century, however, one is struck by how often the opposite occurs—leftist revolutionaries, at least as late as 1848, often demanded a minimal government, while the Right generally wished it to be fairly large and active, especially in

⁴⁵¹ Johann Christoph Allmeyer-Beck, *Der Konservatismus in Österreich* (Munich, 1959), 26.

ensorship and policing powers but also in various means of social management. And at least in part, this dichotomy stemmed from conservatives' fear of the masses (itself a byproduct of the French Revolution) and their belief that only a powerful central state could contain the threat. This was itself a reversal of the situation before 1789, when it was the enlightened reformers, the progressives of their day, who sought to centralize power, chiefly in the name of creating a more efficient government; while traditionalists like Möser sought to preserve a more corporatist political structure that diffused power: a structure for which Gentz, it will be remembered, had little patience, either before or after his break with the Revolution. The conclusions of the preceding paragraph would seem to explain this situation, if we assume that the Gentzian variety of conservatism triumphed over its bedfellows in Europe (or at least Germany) at this time. If so, then that, too, is his legacy.

This attitude had its positive and negative sides. On the one hand, his refusal to get carried away with the mystical or the sensational meant that he never fell into the same traps as many of the romantics, including even his friend Adam Müller, did; Gentz always speculated with both feet on the ground. On the other, this self-limitation prevented him from creating a fleshed-out vision of a conservative society, or at least one that amounted to more than simply maintaining order and protecting the existing social structures, which has much to do, perhaps, with why he could not support the medieval corporatism advocated by Justus Möser, Karl Ludwig von Haller, and others. It is perhaps unfair to keep comparing him with Burke, but part of what made Burke so successful as a conservative philosopher was his insistence that faith, prejudice, tradition—all the irrational things in life—were good in and of themselves, just as much as that which was rational. While Gentz always had some sympathy for this viewpoint, he could never fully endorse it. It is telling that while he gave significant attention to the problems

plaguing the Austrian Empire internally, he never expressed any thought of permitting limited autonomy to its diverse constituencies--partly because there was so much more at stake for him where Austria was concerned, but partly too because at heart, he remained within the enlightened absolutist tradition of Frederician Prussia.

His failure to convert to Catholicism, for example, can be seen in this light. As we have seen, he repeatedly admitted that he found much to admire in the faith, and was seriously considering “swimming the Tiber” on several occasions, especially later in life. But it was the organizing principle in Catholicism he chiefly prized, its natural antipathy to revolution and its status as a buttress of order and stability. Though not deaf to its spiritual and emotional charms, he was not willing to, as he saw it, place them above his own reason. However pleasant the aura of the Pope as the successor to St. Peter might be, he could not square this with the reality of the Pope’s person as the infirm ruler of a miserable Italian principality. He could not set all else aside for the Catholic faith; he could not have a genuine religious experience—and he was too honest, at bottom, to be only an external Catholic. Hence he never converted, remaining at least a nominal Protestant until his death--a faith that seemed somewhat more in keeping with the *Aufklärung* in which he was raised.⁴⁵²

These traits were reflected on by one of the only non-historians to pay much attention to Gentz, the 20th-century German legal scholar and political theorist Carl Schmitt. Much of Schmitt’s work has been tainted by his involvement with the Third Reich, but he devoted his career to investigating the foundations for a stable political order and the nature of such concepts as consent and the rule of law. His 1919 book *Political Romanticism* was an attempt to describe the ideology of romanticism as it appeared around 1800 and how it was reflected in such German

⁴⁵² Gentz, *Tagebücher*, I, 264.

intellectuals as Fichte, Schlegel, Adam Müller, and others. Schmitt argued that romanticism, specifically its political form, was essentially the reduction of politics to an experience, the desire to find personal fulfillment through a transformation of the existing order, and submission to what were already being thought of as the “laws of historical development.” This concept, just beginning to find favor in German intellectual circles, would come to full fruition later in the century through Hegel and later Marx.⁴⁵³

In contrast, Schmitt continues, Gentz, along with such men as Burke, De Maistre, and others of a similar political persuasion, refused to treat politics in such a solipsistic manner. He (and they) believed firmly that there were right and wrong choices to be made in politics, but whatever choice one made, one ought to stand by it and lay out a case for it. Only when statesmen acted in such a rational manner could a political system function relatively smoothly. By taking such a stance, argued Schmitt, Gentz marked himself clearly as a man of the eighteenth century—that is, of the latter part of the Old Regime, the era that ended with the French Revolution. Though others have occasionally classed him as a romantic from his personal tendencies, “The decisive matter is the rational clarity of his thought, his reasonable, matter-of-fact attitude, his capacity for legal argument, his sense of the limits of the efficacy of the state...Especially in matters of politics and personal philosophy, every romantic disintegration of concepts always remained unintelligible to him, and he refused to have anything to do with ‘fantastic and mystical apothegms and metaphysical fancies.’”⁴⁵⁴

One may object that this analysis is not entirely true. After all, Gentz did indeed endorse the French Revolution in its early stages, and at first glance seemed amenable to the “romantic concept” that it would lead to the end of the corrupt old order and be the path to a shiny new

⁴⁵³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 1-6, 10-12.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 23, 122.

future. In reality, though, his support for the Revolution was based on the belief, or at least the hope, that it would be an instance of constitutional reform in the best eighteenth-century tradition. It was when the Revolution appeared to turn away from this path, and down the path of utopian fanaticism, that his sympathy for it waned. As a judgment on his overall career, his public and private character, the social milieus in which he traveled, and the political positions he took, often at no small cost to himself, Schmitt appears more correct than otherwise.

Friedrich Gentz was essentially a man of the eighteenth century; his attitudes were shaped by enlightened absolutism, rational top-down reform, political realism, and the social hierarchies of the Old Regime in its last full flower, and despite being only too aware of the changing world around him, he strove to live by, and convince others to live by, the values and assumptions of that earlier period. By the time he died, the task was well-nigh impossible, and he knew it: “Jacksonian democracy” and universal manhood suffrage had come to America, Britain was passing its great Reform Bill, the last economic vestiges of the Old Regime were being swept away in France, and in Germany, as Schmitt says, “the portents of the year 1848 and the revolution of the German bourgeoisie could already be recognized.” Gentz did not know this last, of course, but he could see the approaching industrial society that would come to define the nineteenth century and its politics, and wanted no part of it. Therefore, it seems only fitting that it was in this year he passed away: he was already a man out of time.⁴⁵⁵

Gentz himself was aware of this fact; the impermanence of the world he grew up in was only too obvious. Yet he had considered it to his credit that he had fought to maintain and preserve it for as long as he had, rather than reflexively embracing the new, and perhaps that attitude, more than anything else he said or did, marks him as being in the conservative tradition.

⁴⁵⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 22-23.

It is only fitting that he be allowed the last word, from the same letter with which this conclusion began:

I have always been conscious that despite the majesty and power of my superiors, despite all the lonely victories that we achieved, the spirit of the age would prove mightier in the end than we; that thoroughly as I have despised the press for its extravagances, it would not lose its dread ascendancy over all our wisdom; and that guile, no more than force, would be able to stay the great wheel of time, as you have written with equal truth and beauty. But that was no reason for me not to carry out the task faithfully and persistently, once it had fallen to me; only an unworthy soldier deserts his flag when fate seems inimical, and I have enough pride to say to myself in darker moments, *Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed vista Catoni*.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁶ *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 322. "The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the vanquished one pleased Cato."

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Vita

Travis Eakin was born in Missouri in 1988 and raised in the town of Bell City, in Stoddard County. He attended Bell City High School, achieving distinction on the school's Academic Team, and graduated in 2005 as valedictorian. After graduation, he went to Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, where he majored in history, submitting several lengthy papers on the SS-Einsatzgruppen, the Soviet collectivization of agriculture, and the rise of political religions in modern Europe. In 2009, he graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor's in History, then attended the University of Mississippi and obtained his Master's in European History.

In 2012, Eakin transferred to the University of Missouri at Columbia to study for his Ph.D., with Dr. Jonathan Sperber as his advisor. After passing his comprehensive exams in 2014, he began work on his dissertation, in the meantime taking two research trips to Germany: one with the German Historical Institute in the summer of 2015, then as a Fulbright Fellow from September 2016 to July 2017. After returning to the University of Missouri, he completed his dissertation and successfully defended it in December 2018.

Eakin has held a Teaching Fellowship from the History Department for the 2018-19 academic year. He currently lives in Columbia, and plans to seek employment teaching at college in the near future.