

# Fichte & the German Nation

[William Pierce](#)



Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 1762–1814

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Johann Gottlieb Fichte was one of those rare men who are both thinkers and heroes. His challenging *Wissenschaftslehre* (“doctrine of science”) remains one of the most ambitious attempts to encompass the world and its meaning in a speculative philosophical system. In his elaboration of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy of ethical idealism, Fichte achieved a compelling synthesis of the complementary values of freedom and duty. His conception of the world as the material projection of an ultimately all-embracing World-Ego exercised a seminal influence on the Romantic movement, that radical reassertion of Aryan racial values which in Fichte’s time was displacing the shallow rationalism of the Enlightenment.

Yet it is as the hero who called for a regeneration of the German spirit in an epoch-making series of addresses in a conquered Berlin swarming with hostile French troops that Fichte will live on in the memory of his countrymen. In his *Addresses to the German Nation*, the *philosophus teutonicus*, as the patriot-poet Ernst Moritz Arndt dubbed Fichte, revealed a vision of his people’s destiny which transcends national boundaries and still beckons to our own and future generations for fulfillment.

In December of 1807, it seemed that Napoleon and his all-conquering French armies had extinguished the last ember of German nationhood. In the year before, the Holy Roman Empire, the only tangible expression of the political unity of the German nation, feeble though it was, had been dissolved. More important, Fichte’s adopted homeland, Prussia, had reaped the fruits of over a decade’s timidity and indifference to the fate of its German neighbors. On October 14, 1806, at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstädt, Napoleon’s troops had all but annihilated the once matchless Prussian military machine. After fleeing to Königsberg in East Prussia, the well-meaning but irresolute Hohenzollern, King Frederick William III, had been forced to sign away half his country’s territory in the humiliating Treaty of Tilsit. Prussia was further obligated to pay a crippling indemnity, and Berlin was garrisoned by French troops.



A TRIUMPHANT NAPOLEON leads his troops through the Brandenburg Gate into Berlin on October 27, 1806, thirteen days after annihilating the Prussian Army at Jena and Auerstädt. This pro-French painting, by Charles Meynier, scarcely exaggerates the acclaim turncoat Berliners showered on the emperor. Prominent among the supporters of the French conquerors were the members of a race synonymous with treachery. As one historian put it, “Only the Jews were wholeheartedly and unhesitatingly pro-French, since they knew that one of the [French] revolutionary principles was their political and social emancipation . . .”

Fichte, even when he had tended to support the ideals of the French Revolution, pointedly excluded the Jews from consideration as German citizens. In anticipation of the National Socialist program, he advocated their deportation from Germany.

More ominous than the military collapse of Prussia and the other German states was the concomitant decline in German morale. The purely dynastic patriotism which the various German princes had attempted to foster among their subjects had proved no match for the intense nationalism which spurred the French invaders. Although, predictably, Germany’s Jews had accorded Napoleon his most enthusiastic welcome, many a Berlin burgher had also cheered the triumphant entry of the French imperial army. Prominent citizens sought audiences with the emperor, and sycophantic writers wrote panegyrics to his genius.

In pointed contrast to Napoleon’s effusive admirers, German patriots had fallen silent, content to denounce the foreign oppressors only to their most trusted friends in the privacy of their drawing rooms. There was ample justification for their timidity. French spies and German informers in their service were everywhere, and the French censors had more than blue pencils at their disposal.

Little more than a year before, Johannes Palm, a Nuremberg bookseller, had been arrested in connection with the writing and circulation of an anonymous anti-French pamphlet entitled *Germany in Her Deepest Humiliation*. He had been betrayed to the authorities by a German policeman. On August 26, 1806, Palm had been shot in the little Austrian town of Braunau-on-the-Inn (which, 83 years later, was to acquire even greater cause for the veneration of German patriots).

In these desperate circumstances, the philosopher Fichte resolved to speak out publicly in the cause of the German nation. He had accompanied the Prussian court and the remnants of Prussia's battered army to Königsberg in 1806. There, his reputation for radicalism had frustrated him in his attempts to be appointed field preacher to the troops. Disappointed but still overflowing with determination to rekindle the German spirit, Fichte returned to Berlin in August 1807.

He took up residence with his family in the secluded Georgengarten, in a section of Berlin rarely frequented by the French soldiers. In the following months, he immersed himself in the writings of Machiavelli and the Swiss educator Pestalozzi, but above all in the *Annals* of Tacitus, in which the heroic deeds of Hermann the Cherusker against the Roman legions find their echo.

Drawing on these writers for inspiration, Fichte began to compose a series of lectures which incorporated the spirit of Machiavelli's and Hermann's fervent patriotism, and drew on Pestalozzi's concrete proposals for educational reform. Professor Fichte (who was at that time a member of the faculty of the University of Erlangen) announced the addresses in a brief notice in the *Vossischer Zeitung*, one of the leading Berlin newspapers of the day. According to the announcement, the lecture series was to be the continuation of a popular course Fichte had delivered in Berlin three years before, which he had titled *The Characteristics of the Present Age*.

The Berliners who crowded the amphitheatre of the Academy of Sciences at noon on Sunday, December 13, 1807, were doubtless drawn by more than intellectual curiosity. Fichte had never shrunk from controversy, particularly in addressing the vital questions of the day, nor did he show any qualms in skewering his intellectual opponents on the sharp prongs of his scathing polemics. Would he be as forthright in dealing with the French?

There was also the problem of continuity with the previous lecture series. Attentive students of Fichte could recall that in his *Characteristics* addresses, the philosopher had represented himself as something other than the fervent patriot he had revealed himself to be in the intervening years. In fact, Fichte had proudly boasted of a cosmopolitanism in which "we ourselves and our descendants can remain indifferent forever to the affairs and fates of nations and states." How were these sentiments to be reconciled with Fichte's present stance?

Fichte was not unmindful of Palm's fate. Later, during the course of his lectures, he wrote to his friend, the Prussian counselor Beyme: "I know full well what I am risking; I know that I can be shot just like Palm. But I have no fear, and would gladly die for the realization of my goal."

Elsewhere Fichte wrote: "The only decisive factor is, can you hope that the good to be accomplished is greater than the danger to be risked? That good is inspiration, exaltation. My personal danger doesn't matter; rather, it could be extremely advantageous. My family and my son would not lack the nation's

assistance; my son would reap the benefits of his father's martyrdom. That would be the best outcome. I couldn't make better use of my life."



Fichte dedicated his life not only to finding the truth but to proclaiming it to the world, regardless of the consequences. His stirring Addresses to the German Nation, delivered at the risk of arrest or even death at the hands of the French authorities, marked the dramatic high point of his public career, but his contributions to the philosophical basis of the Romantic movement were even more valuable to his posterity. Fichte stressed the importance of intuitive knowledge, that deep wisdom which lies in the race-soul and is sustained by the Universal Consciousness.

It was in this spirit that Fichte inaugurated his *Addresses to the German Nation*. On the podium of the packed amphitheatre, he presented a commanding appearance. Short but robust, his sharp features radiated firmness of purpose. As Immanuel Hermann Fichte, his son and biographer, later wrote, "Fichte's words in his lectures sweep along like a storm cloud that sheds its fire in separate strokes. He does not move, but he uplifts the soul."

Fichte immediately established the connection with his lectures on *The Characteristics of the Modern Age*. In the *Characteristics*, Fichte had developed a scheme of five successive ages, somewhat similar to that propounded by the great German dramatist and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing some years before. According to Fichte, human history was a process of evolutionary progress, yet during the Enlightenment the all-too-rapid supersession of the age of blind faith and obedience by a human reason not yet anchored in a foundation of a real knowledge had ushered in an age of "completed sinfulness."

Now, Fichte proclaimed, the age of completed sinfulness had come to an end, and it was the task of the Germans to lead all mankind to a new epoch of liberation. Despite his universal aims, Fichte made clear that he spoke "only of Germans and only for Germans." It was only the German people who had the qualities of character demanded for initiating the new era. But first it was necessary "to avert the downfall of our nation, which is threatened by its fusion with foreign peoples, and win back again an individuality that is self-supporting and quite incapable of any dependence on others."

From time to time as Fichte spoke, the blare of martial music reached the ears of his listeners. The broad Berlin avenue Unter den Linden ran past the Academy of Sciences, and Napoleon's officers staged frequent parades to maintain the *élan* of their troops.

Within the amphitheatre itself there were Berliners whose attentiveness was neither the product of patriotic ardor nor of a thirst for philosophical enlightenment. They were well known to be informers to the French authorities, and they pricked up their ears to catch any hints of rebelliousness against the rule of the heralds of the “Rights of Man.”

Fichte had cleverly anticipated them. It was not his purpose to castigate the French so much as to promote a German national revival. Besides, as he pointed out, it was not at that time possible to dislodge the conquerors by merely military means. Despite his surface disavowal of anti-French aims, however, Fichte never missed an opportunity, all through the *Addresses*, to belabor the French and, indeed, Napoleon himself, with a characteristically French irony, which evidently eluded the French military government’s journeymen snoops.

The solution which Fichte offered to the ills which beset the German nation, both at the hands of the French and in the context of the self-seeking which had pervaded all classes in Germany even before defeat, was “a total change of the existing system of education.” In its place was to be instituted a system of national education (*Nationalerziehung*), to apply to “every German without exception, so that it is not the education of a single class, but the education of the nation, simply as such and without excepting any of its individual members.”

Fichte concluded his first address with an inspirational evocation of his purpose in speaking out: “The dawn of the new world is already past its breaking; already it gilds the mountaintops, and heralds the coming day. I wish, so far as in me lies, to catch the rays of this dawn and weave them into a mirror, in which our grief-stricken age may see itself; so that it may believe in its own existence, may perceive its real self, and, as in a prophetic vision, may see its own development, its coming forms pass by.”

Fichte’s own life and intellectual development uniquely qualified him for his role as herald of Germany’s awakening. The philosopher’s career provides ample evidence of his own possession of those qualities of mind and will which he sought to instill in others, in sharp contrast to certain other world-betterers (Rousseau and Marx spring to mind).

Johann Gottlieb Fichte was born on May 19, 1762, in Rammenau, Upper Lusatia, in what was then the electorate of Saxony. His origins were humble. His father was a weaver, his mother a woman of simple piety. When Fichte was nine, his quick intelligence caught the eye of a local nobleman, Baron von Miltitz, who decided to sponsor his education. After two years of instruction at a neighboring parsonage, Fichte was enrolled in the renowned Schulpforta, a private boarding school which today numbers, in addition to Fichte, the poet Klopstock, the historian Ranke, and the philosopher Nietzsche among its illustrious alumni.

The education which Fichte acquired at Schulpforta qualified him for membership in Germany’s intellectual elite without estranging him from a consciousness of himself as a man of the people. When Fichte was forced to abandon his university studies after only a year, due to his patron’s death, his democratic feelings were reinforced by nearly a decade’s experience as a tutor to the sons of the noble and wealthy. Treated as little better than a servant by his wealthy employers, Fichte gained a life-long contempt for the aristocracy.

The turning point in Fichte's life came with his introduction, by a university student whom he was tutoring, to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Fichte immediately embraced Kant's rejection of the shallow rationalism and materialism in vogue in German and French philosophy during the 18th century, as well as his "intuitive" justification of God and the immortality of the soul. Fichte quickly mastered Kant's philosophy and in 1791, with Kant's approval, anonymously published *A Critique of All Revelation*, which was immediately taken to be Kant's own work. When Fichte's authorship became known, his reputation was assured. Shortly thereafter, at the urging of Goethe, Fichte was appointed a professor of philosophy at the University of Jena in Saxe-Weimar.

While at Jena, Fichte evolved his *Wissenschaftslehre*, in which he dispensed with Kant's concessions to a reality capable of being objectively apprehended in favor of a world view based entirely on the supremacy of the mind and the will. Among the students he decisively influenced were the poet Novalis, the philosopher Schelling, and the Schlegel brothers, who were both to become outstanding philologists.

In 1799, Fichte was forced out of Jena following a controversy worked up by his opponents around the specious charge that Fichte was an atheist. Departing the allegedly tolerant Saxe-Weimar, he found a ready reception in absolutist Prussia.

In Prussia, Fichte began to develop his philosophy in a direction which took more cognizance of the importance of the nation and the state in providing the conditions under which knowledge and virtue might be attained and cultivated. In 1800 he wrote *The Closed Commercial State*, which sought to harmonize the exigencies of economic justice and the needs of the state. As the first description of a national socialism in other than utopian terms, *The Closed Commercial State* had no small influence on future political thought in Germany.

By 1806 Fichte had evolved the essentials of the ideology of German nationalism which animated the *Addresses to the German Nation*.

Despite Fichte's situation of the *Addresses* in the context of his complex *Wissenschaftslehre*, their central thesis—that Germany's rebirth was to be accomplished through a program of "national education"—is relatively easy to grasp. The ideas which underlie this thesis, however, require a certain amount of elucidation, especially for the modern reader.

Those who approach the *Addresses* in anticipation of a supercharged distillate of anti-French, patriotic fustian will doubtless be disappointed. Fichte's purpose in delivering the *Addresses* was not so much to excoriate the Corsican tyrant and his French (and German) minions as to galvanize his fellow Germans into effective thought and action.

Americans weaned for two generations on propaganda depicting the Germans as frenzied chauvinists will have difficulty in visualizing the degree of indifference to Germany's political fortunes which prevailed among German intellectuals in Fichte's time. During the previous 50 years the leading writers and thinkers of Germany had emancipated the nation's literature and philosophy from their slavish imitation of French models. Yet, in the political sphere, the ideal of men such as Goethe and Kant remained a hazy cosmopolitanism.

Goethe, in particular, affected an Olympian detachment, going so far as to receive Napoleon cordially when the emperor passed through Weimar. As we have seen, even Fichte was long able to delude himself in the notion that he, too, was a “citizen of the world.”

The special task which Fichte set himself in the writing the *Addresses to the German Nation* was to imbue educated Germans with a sense of national mission. To that end, he played on the feelings of cultural and linguistic pride which German intellectuals had developed over the preceding decades.

Fichte argued that the German *Volk* was superior in character to those peoples in Europe, often originally German, who had abandoned their original languages for new ones derived from Latin. Drawing heavily on the theories of the philologist and literary critic August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Fichte differentiated between German, a “living language” or “original language” (*Ursprache*), able to form an intellectual and philosophical vocabulary from its own roots, and the Romance languages, which were forced to draw their scholarly words from a dead language.

According to Fichte, this reliance (in the case of the German language) on native words with concrete connotations to depict the “supersensuous” insured a clarity and honesty of expression sadly lacking in such languages as French and Italian. In fact, the Germans owed their “honest diligence and earnestness in all things” solely to their language.

Unwieldy as this sort of bold reductionism strikes us today, Fichte made good use of it in stirring national pride. Despite his ignorance of the biological factors underlying group differences, Fichte was unerring in delineating the strong points of the German character. In a memorable passage, he described the German spirit as “an eagle, whose mighty body thrusts itself on high and soars on strong and well-practiced wings into the empyrean, that it may rise nearer to the sun whereon it delights to gaze,” in contrast to the less inspired Latin peoples, whose genius he likened to “a bee, which with busy art gathers the honey from the flowers and deposits it with charming tidiness in cells of regular construction.”

Having established at length the worth of German culture and character, Fichte emphasized that the German language, the basis of character and culture, was in danger of disappearing in a Germany dominated by aliens. (“Where a people has ceased to govern itself, it is equally bound to give up its language and coalesce with its conquerors, in order that there may be unity and internal peace and complete oblivion of relationships which no longer exist.”)

The system of national education which Fichte proposed to insure the future survival of the German language—and, thus, of the German people—embodied a far more radical conception than is perhaps evident at first glance. The idea of inculcating in an elite a virtue which can only be acquired through knowledge goes back at least as far as Plato’s *Republic*. Fichte revised this idea by boldly mandating such an education for the entire youth of the nation.

In the words of Fichte, “So there is nothing left for us but just to apply the new system to every German without exception, so that it is not the education of a single class, but the education of the nation, simply as such and without excepting any of its members. In this, that is to say in the training of man to take real pleasure in what is right, all distinction of classes which may in the future find a place in other



branches of development will be completely removed and vanish. In this way there will grow up among us, not popular education, but real German national education.”

The educational system which Fichte envisioned was indebted to the theories of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss who had made his life’s work the education of the children of the poor. In contrast to the force-feeding of the intellect which was the staple of rationalist educational practice, Pestalozzi laid stress on the development of the child’s character. To this concern Fichte added a special emphasis on the training of the will, which he felt had long been greatly neglected by German educators. Briefly, Fichte’s conception of national education was “the art of training the whole man completely and fully for manhood.”

According to Fichte, “When once the generation that has been formed by this education is in existence—a generation impelled by its taste for the right and the good and by nothing else whatever; a generation provided with an understanding that is adequate for its standpoint and recognizes the right unflinchingly on every occasion; a generation equipped with full power, both physical and spiritual, to carry out its will on every occasion—when once this generation is in existence, everything that we can long for in our boldest wishes will come into being of itself from the very existence of that generation, and will grow out of it naturally.”

Fichte concluded the *Addresses* with some of the most stirring oratory in the German language. He threw down a challenge to his German hearers in these words: “Review in your own minds the various conditions between which you now have to make a choice. If you continue in your dullness and helplessness, all the evils of serfdom are awaiting you; deprivations, humiliations, the scorn and arrogance of your conqueror; you will be driven and harried in every corner, because you are in the wrong and in the way everywhere; until by the sacrifice of your nationality and your language, you have purchased for yourselves some subordinate and petty place, and until in this way you gradually die out as a people. If, on the other hand, you bestir yourselves and play the man, you will continue in a tolerable and honorable existence, and you will see growing up among you and around you a generation that will be the promise for you and for the Germans of most illustrious renown. You will see in spirit the German name rising by means of this generation to be the most glorious among all peoples; you will see this nation the regenerator and re-creator of the world.”

As is well known, Fichte’s *Addresses* helped fan the dying embers of German national feeling into a raging inferno which swept the French invaders from the fatherland in the Wars of Liberation five years later. Yet Fichte’s radicalism in demanding a united Germany organized along the lines spelled out in his *Addresses* waited a century and a quarter for its brief realization. In the short period of Germany’s resurgence under National Socialism, Fichte’s ideal of a generation of German youth steeled in character and will first began to take shape.

Fichte’s courage in saying what had to be said at the risk of his own life in 1807 should serve to embolden White men and women in possession of the truth today to speak out unhesitatingly. The philosopher’s vision of a national education cutting across class lines and embracing the whole people to mold young men and women into principled members of their nation and race will remain a beacon urging us on to the future reality.



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