Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852)

A young man at the time of Napoleon’s defeat of Prussia in 1806, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn quickly became a prominent figure in the nationalist movement that swept the German states. An advocate of Prussian and then German nationalism, Jahn was among a group of romantic nationalists who sought to define a new German identity in the early nineteenth century. What role did Jahn play in the burgeoning German nationalist movement? What was his vision of a united Germany?

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Frederick the Great still ruled the Kingdom of Prussia when Friedrich Ludwig Jahn was born in August 1778 in Lanz, a small village in the heart of Brandenburg. His father, a Lutheran minister, provided the boy with an elementary education, freeing the young Friedrich to lead an otherwise fairly unstructured young life. At this early age, Jahn was drawn to gymnastics, which later became a central element in his program for German revival. In 1794, Jahn was sent to Berlin to attend Gymnasium (a preparatory secondary school), and in subsequent years, he went on to study at the universities of Halle, Jena and Greifswald. Like many young Germans of the romantic era, Jahn indulged his Wanderlust, roaming about the German states, taking note of the varied customs, dialects and provincialism that characterized the Germany of that period. The French Revolution and the wars that proceeded from it drew his attention and fanned the roots of his patriotism, though at this point it was Prussian rather than German. In his first book, written in 1799, Jahn lauded the superiority of Prussians, asserting that in battle, “one Prussian defeats three Saxons, Hanoverians, Mecklenburgians, or Swedes.”

His faith in the strength of Prussian might was, however, soon severely tested. Following the death of Frederick II in 1786, the new king Frederick William II did nothing to arrest the
decline of Prussian military might that was already underway. The Napoleonic Wars quickly revealed that Prussia had far too long rested on the Frederician legacy, failing to modernize its army. When Prussia went to war against Napoleon’s armies in 1806, the kingdom suffered crushing defeats at Jena and Auerstadt. According to popular legend, Jahn, who had enlisted in the army, was so shocked by the disasters that his hair turned gray virtually overnight. The same year, Jahn received his doctorate in philology from Leipzig University, having written a dissertation on the German language.

Events, however, led him to focus his attention on the sorry state of German affairs, as states large and small were compelled to submit to Napoleonic France. Jahn’s earlier Prussian allegiance now gave way to a broader German nationalism, forged to a great degree by hatred for the French oppressors. Language, which Jahn and others saw as a crucial factor in defining national identity, was an expression of national solidarity and opposition to the immorality of imperial French culture. “If you let your daughter learn French”, Jahn asserted, “you might as well teach her to become a whore.” Together with nationalist spokesmen Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Ernst Moritz Arndt, Jahn was increasingly drawn to the concept of pan-German unity. Germany’s current degraded status, Jahn argued, could be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia, which had ended the Thirty Years’ War in 1648. Germany had remained divided ever since, Jahn maintained, not only because of the absence of a single German state, but because the German Volk (a term connoting a folk or racial community) had never developed a sense of unity. “A state is nothing without a Volk – a soulless artifact,” he wrote. “A Volk is nothing without a state – a bodiless phantom, like the wandering Gypsies and Jews. Only the unity of the state and Volk makes a Reich (empire).”

In 1809, chaffing under the continuing French domination of the German states, Jahn went to work as a teacher at the same Berlin Gymnasium that he had once attended and together
with another instructor, developed a plan for martial training that was in part derived from Greek ideals of the harmony of body and spirit and Fichte’s proposals for a unitary national education. In 1811, Jahn established the first *Turnplatz* (gymnastics field) on the Hasenheide in Berlin, where his new *Turnschaft*, or Gymnastics Society, was to serve as an instrument of national revival. The Gymnastics Society was to be a training ground for a people’s militia, which would give a popular dimension to the struggle for Germany’s freedom and unity. According to Jahn, through exercise and athletics, “the entire *Volk* will become manly and patriotic, and feeling its power, will be reborn.” The *Turnschaft* was also a visible symbol of German unity and equality, as Jahn sought to erase the class and social differences of his followers. All who participated, students and workers alike, wore simple gray linen uniforms and were encouraged to address one another in informal language. That same year Jahn, now dubbed “Father” by his youthful admirers, helped found the German League, a patriotic society. This inspired the creation of the *Burschenschaft*, a nationalist student organization. The Prussian government, feverishly pursuing administrative and military reforms aimed at preparing for a war of liberation against the French, quietly subsidized Jahn’s activities.

In 1813, the long awaited struggle against French domination was joined, as Prussia and Austria led the German states in a war of liberation. Frederick William III, who had assumed the throne in 1797, authorized Jahn and his adherents to fight in a volunteer unit, the Lützow Corps. Though ill health compelled Jahn to leave the campaign, his followers acquitted themselves well and he was rewarded with an honorary government salary. Napoleon’s defeat at Leipzig in 1813 was the prelude to Germany’s liberation and the collapse of the French empire. Jahn, who married in 1814, was among those who paraded through the streets of Paris following Napoleon’s final defeat that year. His vision of German identity and unity at this juncture included many romantic elements. Jahn’s ideal united German society would be organic in
nature, reflecting the unity brought by history, culture, language and tradition. Accordingly, in his search for a unique and unitary German tradition, Jahn came to advocate a form of cultural primitivism, exalting the customs, ideals and institutions of the ancient Teutonic tribes. And as in ancient times, the unification of the German Volk would demand a “unity-creator,” a dictator capable of ending German provincialism and imposing unity by stringent means, if necessary. “The Volk will honor him as a savior,” Jahn wrote, “and forgive him all his sins.” It was clearly not a liberal, much less a democratic vision.

Jahn’s growing fascination with primitive cultural nationalism was evidenced by his appearance and attire in Paris. German historian Heinrich von Treitschke offered a derogatory description: “Jahn’s long hair…hung down uncombed upon his shoulders; his neck was exposed, for the servile stock and the effeminate waistcoat were equally unsuitable for the free German. The low-cut neckband of his dirty coat was covered by a wide shirt-collar. With great self-satisfaction, he extolled the questionable get-up as ‘the genuine Old German costume.’” To demonstrate his disdain for the conquered French, Jahn climbed the Arc de Triomphe, where he knocked the tuba from the goddess of victory’s mouth. He carried the same attitude of vengeful defiance when he attended the Congress of Vienna that year.

Jahn’s primitive nationalism, resting on a romantic vision of an arguably mythological Teutonic past, may have seemed eccentric even to some of his contemporaries, but any potential divisions among German nationalists faded as it became clear that in post-Napoleonic Europe, a conservative continental order was to be reimposed. Prospects of a united Germany evaporated as Austria, under the direction of Klemens von Metternich, assumed the dominant role among the German powers. Prussia reverted to authoritarian government, the promises of the reform era trampled by the reactionary king. Despite these disappointments, “Father” Jahn continued his advocacy of the gymnastic movement, publishing a major book on the subject in 1816. The
forces of reaction were strong, however, and German governments, at Metternich’s urging, moved to suppress the remaining sparks of the nationalist movement. Jahn’s Berlin Turnerschaft was closed down, and authorities throughout the German states moved to suppress the still troublesome Burschenschaften elsewhere.

In July 1819, Jahn was arrested for treason and held without trial until 1824, at which point he was sentenced to serve two years in a fortress prison. The event marked the beginning of a lengthy period during which Jahn, even after his release from prison, was restricted in his activities and closely monitored by police spies at his residence in Freiburg. In 1840, the succession of Frederick William IV, who gave promise of more liberal policies, brought an end to the strict surveillance and in 1842 the prohibition of the gymnastic societies was ended. Once again, the currents of German nationalism began to flow more freely and Jahn’s Turnerschaften recruited new members. The revolutions of 1848 brought the next major opportunity for German unification, as the Prussian king seemed to bend to the demands of liberals and nationalists and the Austrian imperial family fled their capital in the face of revolutionary upheaval. With Metternich, the personification of reaction and oppression, driven from power, the path to a new united Germany seemed open. Most hopes rested on the German National Parliament meeting in Frankfurt, where Jahn was soon seated as a delegate from the district of Merseburg. There, he planned to “speak in public assembly as a representative of the German people on behalf of the unity and freedom of Germany.”

Much to his dismay, Jahn discovered that time and events had made his vision of a united Germany irrelevant. An advocate of a traditional, hierarchical society that deferred to elites, Jahn found little support at Frankfurt for his ideas. Most at the assembly desired elimination of the privileged position of Germany’s nobility and the creation of a liberal political culture resting on constitutions and representative assemblies. Jahn was appalled by these impulses and took to the
floor to denounce the “subversive activities of the communist associations of the so-called radical democrats.” Their ideologies, Jahn feared, precluded the unification of the German people around the traditional social and political institutions that he valued so highly. The assembly’s initial rejection of a hereditary German emperor further outraged the sixty-nine-year-old nationalist. Long since committed to the necessity of a monarch, Jahn found the assembly’s “democratic” tendencies unfathomable. As events were to prove, neither the liberal nor the nationalist aspirations of the assembly were realized, as the German revolution sputtered out in 1849. The opportunity to unite Germany under liberal auspices failed. More than two decades were to pass before Otto von Bismarck united Germany as an authoritarian empire.

Jahn did not survive to witness Germany’s unification in 1871. After 1848, events relegated “Father” Jahn to relative obscurity. As a result of his reactionary positions at Frankfurt in 1848, Jahn was rejected as leader of the *Turnschaften*, and he retired to Freiburg, where he died in October 1852. Though his vision of a united Germany was largely repudiated in 1848, Jahn nonetheless played a major role in the nationalist movement throughout the years of the Napoleonic Wars and during the early part of the restoration era. While many of his ideas looked to the past rather than the future, he did much to engender and organize German nationalist sentiment. Later historians detected some sinister elements in Jahn’s thought that seemed to presage the extreme nationalism promoted by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in the next century. Jahn’s emphasis on physical culture, the purity and strength of the *Volk*, and the need for submission to the state led historian Peter Viereck to describe “Father” Jahn as “the first stormtrooper.”

**Selected Readings**
