The development of liberal and nationalist ideas in the German Confederation

The German Confederation was set up by the Vienna settlement in 1815 (see map on page 152). It was dominated by Austria and Prussia. Both these states had territory inside and outside the confederation. It was a loose federation of independent states headed by a diet under the presidency of Austria. There was no federal law, foreign policy or currency; even agreements about a federal army were flawed. The confederation was not solely German; it contained also minorities of Czechs, Slovenes, Italians and Danes. However, the confederation did give Austria a major influence in German affairs, reflected in the policies pursued by Metternich (see page 167).

Liberal and nationalist movements in 'Germany' have their origin in the influence of French revolutionary ideas and in reaction to them and French depredations during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In southern Germany, many bourgeois welcomed the liberal ideas that followed in the wake of French armies in the 1790s. It was in the southern states like Baden and Bavaria that French influence was felt longest and liberal ideas won much support. Elsewhere French revolutionary ideas were too closely linked with military defeat, French occupation and French exploitation to be attractive to others. To a degree German nationalism arose as a reaction against the French.

German intellectuals like J. G. Fichte, Arndt, Jahn and G. W. F. Hegel rejected political liberalism of the French variety and instead sought to identify and encourage a distinctive German sense of nationhood. They sought their inspiration not in the ideas of the revolution – which they viewed as alien – but in the culture, history and language of the ordinary German people, the Volk.

Liberalism did win some concessions in southern Germany after 1815. Baden, Bavaria, Württemberg and one or two other states granted very limited constitutions that guaranteed some rights and provided for the election (by a limited franchise) of assemblies (with very limited powers). Elsewhere (such as in Prussia), liberal aspirations were thwarted.

The first major manifestation of liberal and nationalist protest in the confederation occurred amongst students and academics. Students had begun to form patriotic societies (Burschenschaften) which called for liberal reforms and German unity. In 1817 students from across Germany assembled at Wartburg to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of the Nations (1813), when Napoleon was defeated, and the tercentenary of the German Protestant Reformation begun by Martin Luther in 1517. Nationalist speeches were made and reactionary books, along with effigies of Metternich, were burned. These early flames of German liberalism and nationalism were quickly extinguished by Metternich, who used the excuse of the murder by a student of a reactionary journalist (Kotzebue) to persuade the confederation diet to accept the Karlsbad Decrees in 1819. The measures were enough to stifle, but not kill, the liberal and national movement for a decade. Despite the decrees, liberal political groups continued to exist, as did a few organisations such as the Society of German Natural Scientists and the Exchange Association of German Book

The diet was not an elected assembly, but represented the rulers of the 39 states.

Fichte argued that Germans were the creative, original race in Europe whose distinctive Volkgeist (spirit of the people) needed to be protected.

Hegel argued for the creation of a strong, autocratic German state. There was little in the nationalism of either Hegel or Fichte that smacked of the French view of liberalism.

Before 1517 the Roman Catholic church headed by the pope in Rome was the only Christian church of central and western Europe. It had come under criticism and when Martin Luther put forward his different vision of Christianity, he won support in Germany which led to a split in the religious unity of Europe. Christian opponents of Catholicism became known as Protestants.

The Karlsbad Decrees prohibited political meetings, censored the press, banned Burschenschaften and imposed controls on university teaching. See also pages 168–69.
Dealers. Their number was small and their membership confined to some members of the academic and professional classes.

Whilst political agitation was marginalised and pushed underground, other work was being done that would encourage German nationalism. Academics were researching 'German' history, especially the medieval period, and investigating 'German' folklore. The deeds of Frederick Barbarossa (literally 'red beard') and Grimms' fairy tales became accessible to an increasingly literate German public (adult literacy in Germany was about 30 per cent in this period).

In the 1830s agitation revived in the wake of the July Revolution in France. There were a few minor uprisings in the confederation and the rulers of Saxony, Hanover, Hesse and Brunswick granted constitutions. In 1832 an all-German festival held at Hambach brought together nationalist and liberal students, lawyers, professors, writers, burgheers, artisans and peasants. The German tricolour of black, red and gold was raised and liberal and nationalist speeches were made. This first popular political assembly was met in the same way as the Wartburg Festival of 1817 – by repression. The confederation passed the Six Articles, which banned student societies and the wearing of black, red and gold symbols, and reinforced rigid control of the universities.
As a result of such repression the famous 'Göttingen Seven' were expelled from their university posts for protesting at the abolition of the Hanoverian Constitution in 1837. As the abolition of this Constitution shows, liberals and nationalists had made little headway against the established authorities marshalled by Metternich.

In the 1840s this was beginning to change. The new Prussian king, Frederick William IV, initially raised liberal hopes in 1840 by releasing political prisoners, relaxing press censorship and appointing some liberal ministers. However, the main catalyst for change was, as for the first stirrings of German nationalism, France. In 1840 the French press and politicians had begun to talk about recovering France’s 'natural frontiers'. For Germany this meant a possible attack on the Rhine. The fears aroused by this 'Rhine crisis' led to a vociferous and widespread expression of German nationalism. The press put its weight behind the upsurge in national feeling, publishing such nationalist poems as Becher’s 'They shall not have it, our German Rhine'. The song was so popular that Schumann put it to music. Although the crisis passed, German rulers felt they had to respond to growing mass nationalism. Rather than try to repress it, some began to try to appease it by dropping prohibitions on German organisations. Patriotic societies revived and new expressions of German national identity developed. In 1845, for instance, the first German choral festival was held.

Whilst such cultural activities helped stimulate German nationalism, further encouragement came from economic developments. These have three aspects: the creation of a customs union covering much of the confederation, the growth in communications (roads, canals and railways), and the beginnings of significant industrialisation.

In 1818 Prussia decided to rationalise its customs arrangements. Trade was hindered by 67 different tariffs across its territories. It decided to abolish all duties on trade between its provinces and to simplify the tariffs imposed on foreign trade. Prussia thereby became a free-trade area. This stimulated economic development and encouraged other states to join it or copy it. However, Prussia’s dominance of the major trade routes (especially the Rhine) compelled most German states to join the Prussian Union. By 1834 the Zollverein (customs union) had been formed from 17 out of the 39 German states. This represented two-thirds of the territorial area of the confederation and about the same proportion of its population. Crucially for the future of Germany, Austria was not a member. Economic union helped create ever closer links between the various states of the confederation. Some German nationalists quickly grasped its potential political implications: economic union could lead to political union.

As significant perhaps was the growth in communications after 1815. There were a group of academicians, including the Grimm brothers.

What were the key features of German nationalism and liberalism in the period 1815–40?

Another of the popular songs of the time was 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles' ('Germany, Germany over all'), which later became the German national anthem.

The nationalist poet Föllerslieben, for example, viewed the Zollverein as 'a bond around the German fatherland, and this bond had done much more than the confederation to bind our hearts together'.

In what ways did economic developments encourage the growth of nationalism?
was a rapid expansion of the road and canal network and in 1835 came the first German railway. By 1845 there were over 3,000 km of track. This, coupled with developments like the electric telegraph and the expansion of newspapers and journals, helped develop national consciousness and a sense of national community. One economist viewed railways as binding the limbs of Germany ‘together into a forceful and powerful body’.

Finally, in the 1840s industrialisation began to take off in parts of Germany, with new industries feeding the demands of the railways for locomotives, carriages and rails. This new industrial activity and the growth of commerce as a result of the Zollverein meant the expansion of a commercial and industrial middle class. Many industrialists believed in the liberal economics of free trade and sought a national political structure that would recognise and respond to their concerns: they wanted a liberal and united Germany.

One should not get the impression that by the 1840s liberalism and nationalism were on the march and their victory was inevitable. On the contrary, some historians refer to these years before 1848 as the ‘quiet years’. This emphasises the fact that, even in the 1840s, there was no coherent nationalist or liberal movement and certainly no movement that could deliver mass support. As elsewhere, rulers tended to overestimate the reality of the liberal and nationalist threat, if not its revolutionary potential. The above account illustrates the limitations; there were relatively few examples of liberal or nationalist agitation and no sustained pressure. A few festivals, some student and academic societies and a little anti-French xenophobia are hardly persuasive evidence of an extensive movement. Support for liberalism and nationalism was restricted to a proportion of the educated classes: students, some academics, some lawyers, some artisans and some members of the wider middle class. What is more, the vision of these supporters varied. Liberals were divided over the extent of liberal reforms desired and feared the radicalism of those who supported manhood suffrage. Nationalists were divided over the territorial extent and political structure of any potential ‘united Germany’. These divisions were to become apparent in 1848. On the eve of the 1848 revolutions, the desire for liberal and nationalist reform was growing, and arguably in the 1840s it was beginning to grow faster, but it was still limited.