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Posted April 18, 2022. Editor's Headline: No Joy in Ode to Joy

In my youth my family escaped from Soviet-occupied East Germany to settle not far from the birthplace of the playwright and dramatist Friedrich Schiller, best known today for his “Ode to Joy,” some lines of which Ludwig van Beethoven incorporated into his Ninth Symphony. When I was fourteen, my language class examined the life and times of Schiller while in Music, we learned to sing Beethoven’s immortal chorale in celebration of the poet’s 150th birthday.

At the time I found in my reader a fable that must have originated in the 1600s. The daughter of a giant, observing a plowman with his team of oxen, gathers into her apron the team, the plow, and the small human. She carries them to her castle to use as playthings, but her father admonishes her to put back the peon where she found him: “He provides us with the food we eat.”

An elite of “giant” oppressors subjugating the masses is the subtext of Schiller’s dramatic long-poem. Composed in 1785 as a tribute to zest for life, the poem also celebrates the bucking of social injustice. “Drunk with fire, we enter, Heavenly One, thy sanctum,” reads its second line. Drunk with fire? It’s the fire of social unrest, the fire of revolution. An ocean away American colonists had decimated the rule of their British overlords, while in a colonial holding then called Dominique, a motley band of self-liberated slaves had acted in insurrection against their oppressors from far-away France.

The masses in France sympathized; the country was afire with the cry for “Liberation, Equality, Brotherhood,” a cry that resonates in “Ode to Joy”: “Be embraced, ye millions!” Salvation from “the tyrant’s chains” draws near when “All humans become brethren.” Like their French neighbors, Germans hoped to abolish feudalism in favor of a government by the people and for the people.

In Schiller’s time, Germany was a patchwork of fiefdoms—small kingdoms, duchies, and independent city-states. As a young man Schiller had escaped the duke of Württemberg’s military academy in Stuttgart to settle in Mannheim, less than 60 miles away but located in a “foreign country,” a duchy with its own borders. His first drama had been staged there to acclaim, but his duke forbade him any further literary “escapades.” Schiller’s flight happened during the duke’s feast days; still, he worried lest his overlord seize and remand him into a dungeon, or else avenge himself on his parents. Luckily neither happened.

“Ode to Joy” is suffused with the revolutionary spirit in neighboring France which, in turn, was inspired by American defiance. The poem is alive with the French revolution’s ethos. “All humans become brethren where joy touches the heart,” wrote Schiller. Like their French neighbors, Germans hoped to abolish feudalism in favor of a government by the people, for the

people. In Schiller's time Germany consisted of a patchwork of fiefdoms--small kingdoms, duchies, and independent city-states.

During France's revolutionary upheaval, a young general was able to seize power. Napoleon Bonaparte, born in Corsica of minor Italian nobility, had served as artillery officer during the French Revolution. Seizing opportunities in chaos, he rapidly rose through the ranks; by the time he turned 24 he had become a general in the French army. Not only did Napoleon lead the country into wars across the globe, but also his lifestyle was as imperialist as that of France's beheaded late monarch, Louis XIV.

In the outskirts of Leipzig, city of my birth, rises a memorial to the "Battle of Nations." Its construction took forever and only was completed a hundred years after the gargantuan battle it commemorates. That battle was fought by a coalition formed by Russia and Prussia against Emperor Napoleon, whose army comprised not only French troops but also soldiers from Poland and Italy, and even Germans from the Confederation of the Rhineland. In four days of battle, 100,000 men lost their lives, yet the slaughter proved inconclusive. Today the monument serves as a warning. Not long after the monument's completion, Prussia declared war on its erstwhile partner, Russia.

By the time Beethoven set to music Schiller's optimistic lines, the promising beginning in France had given way to horrid bloodbaths.

Following the battle against Napoleon on the plains of Jena, the king of Prussia united Germany as Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm. Sadly, like most feudal rulers he lacked political savvy, thinking his blood relations with other European monarchs—he was a grandson of England's Queen Victoria and a cousin to the Tzar of Russia—would sustain him. He was wrong. His connections did nothing to calm the crisis that followed the June 1914 assassination in Sarajevo, Bosnia, of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his pregnant wife. The Kaiser initiated a war against Russia that turned into the first world war. It ended with German capitulation and the "peace" treaty of Versailles that planted the seeds for the next war.

Soon a political party came to power in Germany that ceased the reparations payments imposed by the victors and raised a German army in defiance of the Versailles edict. It elevated racism into a national priority and instigated a reign of terror beyond belief. Today I wonder over the godly spark, the "Götterfunken" of joy, that once moved Schiller. Racist virulence in my country made it a wishful fantasy. American racism seems headed in the same direction.

And now another war's bombs decimate a country near Poland. "We never thought we would see another war in Europe," my cousin said in a recent telephone talk. "We are deeply unhappy." Schiller's celebratory vision had vanished in the country that originated it.