



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Johann Plenge, *1789 and 1914 [1789 und 1914]* (1916)

Johann Plenge (1874-1963), a German philosopher in Heidelberg, interpreted the First World War as a German revolution, akin to the French revolution of 1789. Yet, instead of the pursuit of individual freedom, superficiality, and the pursuit of selfish interest—as portrayed in the French revolution—the German revolution asserted the community over the individual.

[...]

Thus the idea of freedom of 1789 is not the idea of freedom as such, but instead a quite distinct stage in the idea of freedom: the abstract idea of freedom that corresponds to the empty, atomistic, individual will. The self-determination of the democratic state is thus but the self-determination of a mere mass of atomized wills, which are admittedly more than this mere mass of equal parts, but who see themselves in the deceptive reflection of their own lives as this mere crowd!

[...]

Let us take an example. Since 1789 there has been no revolution in the world like the German revolution of 1914. *The twentieth-century revolution of construction and consolidation of the state's full powers versus the eighteenth-century revolution of destructive liberation.* Thus there is a correct note in all the noise about the new Napoleon. For a second time, an emperor is moving through the world as the leader of a people that has the enormous feeling of power that comes from storming the world in utmost unity. And one may properly claim that the “ideas of 1914,” the ideas of German organization, are destined to become a triumphal procession through the world as enduring as the “ideas of 1789” were.

But the ideas of 1789, the ideas of unbounded freedom, verged into limitlessness. The ideas of the healthy consolidation of all powers have [by contrast] their inherent proper proportions.

When someday we celebrate this war in a commemorative festival, it will be the festival of mobilization. The festival of August 2! The festival of domestic victory! – Here was our new spirit born: the spirit of the most powerful consolidation of all economic and political powers into a new whole, in which all live with the same stake. The new German state! The ideas of 1914!

World history is currently experiencing an immense spectacle: in us a new vital ideal is pushing toward ultimate victory, and in England at the same time a world-historical principle is collapsing for good. The uncontrolled degeneration of a system of profiteering, the threatening actions of coal miners and rail workers, this dual divergence of capital and labor in the hour of a great national danger, represents *the bankruptcy of empty individualism*, the final reckoning with a

once great and liberating cultural ideal, which has now lost its historical meaning. *The soul of English freedom is dying, because this concept of freedom is all too individualistic and unable to sustain the state.* If England wants to become healthy, it must do so by virtue of the German spirit and German organization.

In us lies the twentieth century.

We must be the center of power from which Europe's new cultural development begins, in the event the war really slackens and the glaring antagonism remains.

Source: Johann Plenge, *1789 und 1914: Die symbolischen Jahre in der Geschichte des politischen Geistes* [*1789 and 1914: The Symbolic Years in the History of the Political Spirit*]. Berlin, 1916, pp. 9, 15, 19, 20.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering