

# Gustav Freytag on the Moral Verdict Delivered by Victory over France (1887)

## Abstract

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Gustav Freytag (1816–1895) belonged to the first tier of German journalists, novelists, and political publicists in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Raised in an upper middle-class Prussian family, he served as editor of *Die Grenzboten* (Leipzig) for many years. In February 1867, he was elected to the Reichstag of the North German Confederation as a National Liberal deputy. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, he served as a correspondent in the headquarters of Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm. The excerpt below is from Freytag’s 1887 autobiography. It reflects the euphoria felt by National Liberals as they celebrated the founding of the German Empire. Freytag suggests that the war had been a struggle between competing ideals: its high moral purpose—the defeat of a “guilty” France—justified the loss of life on the battlefield. Indeed, the war became for him an act of divine Providence.

## Source

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Never has there been a struggle with a greater ideal content than the one we have just seen; never before, perhaps, has Nemesis struck down the guilty so awesomely; [...] never before, perhaps, has divine Providence seemed to the human mind so just and comprehensible in its distribution of reward and punishments than on this occasion. The poetry of the course of history was enjoyed by hundreds of thousands, it was evident in countless letters sent from the field by ordinary soldiers.

Source of English translation: Ronald Speirs, “German Literature and the Foundation of the Second Empire,” in *Germany’s Two Unifications: Anticipations, Experiences, Responses*, edited by Ronald Speirs and John Breuilly. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 185–208, here p. 188. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Source of original German text: Excerpt from Freytag’s autobiography (1887) reprinted in Peter Sprengel, “Der Liberalismus auf dem Weg ins ‘Neue Reich’: Gustav Freytag und die Seinen 1866–1871,” in Klaus Amann und Karl Wagner, eds., *Literatur und Nation. Die Gründung des Deutschen Reiches 1871 in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*. Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar, 1996, pp. 153–181, here p. 170.

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