

Georg Forster, “Observations on [France’s] New Communal Spirit” (1793)

Abstract

Georg Forster (1754–94) was an internationally renowned fellow traveler with Captain Cook, a linguist, ethnographer, and savant. He was the most eminent of the German intellectuals to commit himself unreservedly to the French Revolution, championing the Mainz Republic of 1792–93 and dying (of illness) at the Terror’s height in Paris. Here, in a text exemplifying the nationalist enthusiasm generated by the Revolution, he extolls the peaceable national unity that he observed in its early phase.

Source

Observations on the New Communal Spirit

Nowhere was there a better opportunity to engage in these observations than on the Field of Mars in Paris, in July 1790. Here, where the Franks, a free Germanic League, gathered every year to order their kings to [execute] the will of the sovereign people, they now celebrate the first federal festival of their reclaimed liberty. Complete equality had just been reestablished among the citizens through the dismantling of all hereditary differences. Each person mattered only through individual merit, and that was decided by the vote of the people. From the despised huts of the peasants and craftsmen there now emerged, in the splendor of their peculiar qualities of mind, the fatherland’s pillars like new stars, and many a haughty resident of a palace sank, exposed in his personal insignificance, into the dust, unrecognized; for the memory of great ancestors had fallen from his head like a borrowed ornament, and the mendacious luster of foreign virtues had become extinguished. A storm of enthusiasm lifted the entire nation to the heights of self-awareness. To be a man was the lovely pride of 25 million, the first and last goal of their liberation. The Oath of Fraternal Loyalty had been sworn on July 14 on the same hour by all inhabitants of a realm that occupies a space of 10,000 square miles on our globe; on a single day and in a single hour, the solemn affirmations of mutual love and loyalty rose harmoniously to the heavens in 1,900 cities and 100,000 villages. Five hundred thousand people were sitting just on the Field of Mars, refashioned into an amphitheater; residents of the capital and delegates from all the provinces, who appeared here as representatives of their fellow citizens to help celebrate the federative festival; all rose simultaneously from their seats, all raised their arms into the air; from men, women, children resounded the thundering cry: “I swear!” Overcome by this mighty feeling, which reverberated in the tendons of the strongest, these fraternal people embraced each other with no regard for status, age, and sex, and repeated their oath to their unknown neighbor; the national guard threw down their arms and kissed, and suddenly there resounded from all sides, arousing and uplifting: “Long live the nation!”

Only free nations, says the eyewitness we are following here, know this feeling, for only free nations have a fatherland.

I saw the preparations for this festival, which remains unparalleled in the annals of mankind. The greatest amphitheater in the world, compared to which the famous Roman ones were mere child’s play, was created in a few days by the omnipotence of the popular will. The suspect indolence of 15,000 paid workers was made good by the enthusiasm of 100,000 volunteers. In the intoxication of liberty they worked with a zeal, with a profligacy of energy that one can scarcely believe, even if one has seen it in person. The alternation of the working groups was endless, and the order that prevailed everywhere was impossible to conceive, if one failed to bring the enthusiasm of the moment into the equation. No guards

were posted here, the imperious voice of the overseer, let alone his rod, was unknown; the bees and ants, too, build without tyrants and satellites, and yet they complete the construction of their small republic in harmony. The justice of the people sanctifies the property of everyone and protects the rights of everyone. Clothing and watches that had been taken off during the work remained the entire day untouched where they lay. With drums and martial music, shouldering the shovels, the enthusiastic crowds marched arm in arm to their day's work, accompanied by songs of liberty, and they left the field later than the sun. Old and young, men and women, dukes and day laborers, rentiers and shoe-cleaners, bishops and actors, court ladies and fishwives, nuns and priestesses of Venus, chimney sweeps and fops, invalids and school boys, monks and scholars, peasants from the surrounding villages, artists and artisans under their banner, all came arm in arm in a motley procession and set to work stoutly and boldly. A thousand touching expressions of the feelings that had been stirred up everywhere glorified this busy scene; a thousand good-natured jokes, a thousand proofs of Gallic cheerfulness, a thousand examples of noble-mindedness, generosity, and selflessness by the common people appeased the humbled pride of the nobility.

Source: Georg Forster, "Bemerkungen über den neuen Gemeingeist", from *Erinnerungen aus dem Jahre 1790* (1793), in *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by G. G. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1843, vol. VI, pp. 181–83; Reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775-1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, pp. 112–15.

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