

Georg Forster, “On the Relationship of the People of Mainz to the Franks,” delivered to the Society of the Friends of the People in Mainz (November 15, 1792)

Abstract

Noteworthy here is the cosmopolitanism of Forster’s revolutionary rhetoric – he proclaims democratic freedom a universal right and argues against German nationalist prejudice against the French (in a region of Germany that had been devastated by Louis XIV’s armies in the seventeenth century). Yet, by referring to the French as “Franks” (recalling the Germanic component of French identity) Forster tacitly concedes the importance of nationalism, even while arguing for political unification of the Mainz Republic with revolutionary France.

Source

On the Relationship of the People of Mainz to the Franks

Up to now it was the princes' clever politics to carefully separate the peoples from each other, to maintain that they were totally different from each other in customs, character, laws, ways of thinking, and sensitivities, and to foster one nation's hate, jealousy, mockery, and disrespect against the other and thereby secure their own rule all the more. In vain the purest ethics claimed that all men are brothers; the same guild that pretends to have a special calling to teach incited these brothers against each other, because their corrupt and hardened hearts recognized no brother. The gratification of their often ignoble, often bitter passions, and their proud egos were more important to them than anything and allowed no sympathy to emerge in them. Ruling was their first and last happiness, and there was no more reliable means to expand their rule than to blind, delude, and then to plunder those who already found themselves under their yoke.

Among the thousands of inventions with which they hoodwinked their underlings was this one – they carefully let it happen that the belief in hereditary differences among people was extended universally, enforced by laws, and preached by hired apostles. Some people, it was said, were born to decree and rule, and others to possess sinecures and offices; the great mass was made to obey; the Negro because of his black skin and flat nose was intended by Nature to be the slave of the whites; and there were more of the same profanities against the sacred healthy rationality.

However, they have all disappeared from our purified land, which has been sanctified with freedom and equality. These monuments to the evil of the few and the weakness and confusion of the masses have been tossed into the sea of oblivion forever. To be free and equal, the motto of rational and moral people, has also now become our motto. For the use of his strengths, his body, and his spirit, everyone demands the same rights, the same freedom; only the diversity of these strengths determines their diverse application and usefulness. You fortunate one whom Nature has granted great spiritual merits or prodigious bodily strength, are you not satisfied to be equipped for such great enjoyment of your own strengths? How then are you allowed to deprive him, who is weaker than you, of the right to attempt to do what he can with his lesser strengths as long as it does not disadvantage another?

This, fellow citizens, is the language of reason, which for so long was misjudged and suffocated. We are allowed to say it out loud here, here where it was never to be heard as long as the discharge of the breed of people, namely the degenerate, weak-minded, privileged ones, suppressed their superior,

unprivileged brothers. That we hear this speech here, who else do we have to thank for this than the free, the equal, the brave Franks?

It is true that from a young age the Germans are infused with an aversion towards their French neighbors; it is true that their customs, their language, and their temperaments are different; it is true that when the most gruesome monsters still ruled in France, then Germany smoldered at their behest, that the count of Louvois, whose name History will preserve so that the people can curse him, set the Palatinate on fire, and Louis XIV, a miserable despot, lent his name to this hateful order. Do not let yourselves be misled, fellow citizens, by the events of the past; the freedom of the Franks is only four years old, and look, already they are a new, remade people; they, the vanquishers of our tyrants, fall into our arms as our brothers, they protect us, and they give us the most touching proof of their brotherly loyalty, in that they want to share with us their freedom for which they paid so dearly — and this is the first year of the republic! So can freedom work in the hearts of people, so does it sanctify the temple that it inhabits!

What were we only three weeks ago? How could the wonderful transformation happen so quickly, from oppressed, abused, silent subjects of a priest, to unbending, vocal, free citizens, in the bold joy of freedom and equality, ready to live free or die! Fellow citizens! Brothers! The power that so transformed us can meld the Franks and the Mainzers into one people!

Our languages are different — must our concepts also be?

Are *Liberté* and *Egalité* no longer the same treasure of humanity, if we call them freedom and equality? Since when has a difference in language made it impossible to obey the same law? Does not Russia's despot rule over hundreds of people of various tongues? Does not the Hungarian, the Bohemian, the Austrian, the Belgian, and the Milanese speak his own language, and are they all not subjects of one emperor? And were not the inhabitants of half the world once called citizens of Rome? Would it be more difficult for free peoples to jointly commit to the eternal truths, which have their foundation in the nature of humanity, than it was for the slave to obey a master?

At the time when France still stood under the whip of its despots and their cunning tools, it was the model after which all cabinets formed themselves! At that time, princes and noblemen found nothing as honorable as disavowing their mother tongue in order to pronounce bad French even more poorly. But look! The Franks break their chains, they are free — and suddenly the disgusting taste of the lisping and slurring aristocrat changes; the language of free men wounds his tongue, and he would like to convince us that he is a German through and through, and that he is even ashamed of the French language, so that in the end he can introduce his wish that we not imitate the French.

Away with these insidious, weak intuitions! What is true, remains true, in Mainz as in Paris, no matter where or in what language it is said. Somewhere the good must first see the light of day, and then spread over the entire Earth. A Mainzer invented the printing press, and why couldn't a Frank invent the freedom of the eighteenth century? Fellow citizens, prove it out loud that the victory call of this freedom also sounds fearsome to the servants in the German dialect; declare it to them, that they must learn Russian, if they do not want to hear and speak the speech of free men — what do I say? No! Thunder in their ears, that soon one will be able to hear all the thousand languages of the Earth only from the mouths of free people and that nothing will be left for the slaves, once they have renounced rationality, except to take their refuge in barking.

How? The follies and vices of the neighbors, when they were still misled by their tyrants, were imposed upon the Germans through a ridiculous and blameworthy desire to imitate, and one did not shame oneself to lead the people with a disgusting example; now that we could have wisdom, virtue, and happiness — in short, freedom and equality — from their hands, one wants to warn us of the Frankish example? Who does not see through this poor, impotent trick of the dying aristocracy?

The aristocracy always divides humanity; they always sow conflict and hatred to establish their rule more securely. Now, in their fallen condition, they still spread among the people fictitious reports, libelous accusations, treacherous suspicions, empty threats, and a thousand scares in order to win time to bog us down in inactivity, to bring forth tepidness and numbness, and to clear the way to tyranny again. Only the spirit of our society, which everywhere has been a victorious opponent of every scheming craving to rule, will also express its irresistible influence inside our walls, and will destroy their plans. We oppose their efforts to divide us with a close, loyal, brotherly bond. If they want to dampen the desire for freedom and inhibit all movements among us, well! So our basic law is agitation, motion, and action; we kindle the sacred flame, we urge on to reach the great goal, we do not rest until freedom and equality are recognized as the irrevocable principles of human happiness, we exert the strengths which were so long restrained to secure for ourselves possession of the inestimable good which was bestowed upon us without the stroke of a sword through the arrival of our brothers the Franks.

Source: Georg Forster, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by G. G. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1843, Volume VI, pp. 414–17; reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775-1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, pp. 148–52.

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