Fichte the fascist? The misappropriation of a republican philosopher in Weimar, Germany 1918-1933

Michael Albada

Beginning in the late 19th century, the influential philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte came to be posthumously celebrated as a hero of the German nation. His renowned Addresses to the German Nation became a founding document of German nationalism that was frequently used to justify a wide range of political ideologies that differed from, and even contradicted, Fichte’s own philosophy. This pattern reached its climax during the Weimar Republic, when figures representing the full political spectrum – from socialists to liberals to fascists – invoked the philosopher to justify their political agendas. A vocal minority of conservative writers trumpeted and misrepresented Fichte to challenge the newly-created democratic system, support their political agenda, and call for a fascist state. This paper offers a close study of the development of this anti-democratic portrayal of Fichte during the Weimar Republic, providing insight into the dangers of heroification, the intersection between philosophy and politics, and the profound malleability of nationalism as a political ideology.

Few cases provide such a fascinating glimpse into the mythology, grandeur, contradiction, and malleability of nationalism than that of German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, an individual who came to be used to justify a full range of political ideologies from socialism to fascism in the early twentieth century in Germany. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who lived from 1762 to 1814, stood at the crossroads between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. The two coexisted within Fichte’s thought, though certainly not without tension between them. An Idealist philosopher and disciple of Immanuel Kant, Fichte based his thinking on the Enlightenment-era universalistic and cosmopolitan conceptions of the eighteenth century. In his Characteristics of the Present Age, published in 1806, Fichte called on the enlightened mind to reject his government if it decayed and turn to “where light and justice are” in the world. This appeal represented a rejection of local patriotism and embraced a cosmopolitan ideal, which stands in sharp contrast to the countless nationalist invocations of Fichte that dominated the twentieth century.

A staunch supporter of the French Revolution, Fichte fiercely criticized monarchy and the aristocracy, called for a republican government, and proposed a proto-socialist economic system. Fichte saw Napoleon’s rise to power as a rejection of republican ideals and, in his legendary Addresses to the German Nation called on his countrymen to become the beacon of progress to the world, carry out a nationalist awakening, and resist Napoleon’s armies. This perceived shift in Fichte’s writing from cosmopolitanism to nationalism became one of the most contested points of his life and an endless source of dispute. Fichte’s vision of nationalism came well before its time and he remained a largely obscure figure.

The rise of nationalist sentiment in the late nineteenth century brought Fichte to great prominence, venerating him as a prophet to the German nation and bringing him into the budding pantheon of national heroes. This celebration of Fichte as national hero continued through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, placing particular focus on his Addresses to the German Nation, which writers mythologized as the pinnacle of patriotic fervor, moral conviction, and the standard for nationalist rhetoric. This process intensified dramatically during the First World War, when writers invoked Fichte as a prophet of war and source of moral courage for soldiers and citizens alike.

After four years of devastating war and under tremendous strain, the German Empire crumbled. Cities broke into open revolt and the Kaiser and all ruling princes abdicated in November 1918. Meanwhile, a national assembly convened in the city of Weimar and announced the creation of a republic amidst ongoing revolts and tremen
dous social and economic pressures. These ongoing issues contributed to an unstable political situation, where no fewer than six major parties, and many smaller ones, vied for power. On the left side of the spectrum, the Social-Democratic Party focused on social welfare, the German Democratic Party represented intellectuals and small traders, and both parties supported the republic. The German People’s Party and the Centre Party made up the middle and tended to be ambivalent about the republic and wanted a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. On the right side of the spectrum, the National German People’s Party and the National Socialist German Workers’ Party fiercely opposed the democratic system and supported either a return to monarchy or authoritarianism. The Weimar Republic was marred by numerous problems including hyperinflation, political extremism, instability, and came to an end with the ascent of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler to power in 1933. Despite its flaws, however, the Weimar Republic’s collapse was by no means inevitable.

During the time of the Weimar Republic, a vocal minority of conservative writers and political activists used Fichte to call for a powerful nationalist awakening, challenge the newly-created democratic system, and assert German power abroad. While this result was, in a certain regard, the culmination of the long development of national thought in Germany, this anti-democratic, nationalist movement overwhelmingly contradicted Fichte’s own position on the state and the nation. Republican, democratic, and socialist writers also celebrated Fichte, but for very different reasons. Some invoked Fichte to support the new democratic government in Berlin, others to build support for the newly-created League of Nations, and still others to call for a more social-democratic structure of society. In this bizarre moment between the World Wars in Germany, individuals of varying ideologies invoked the same man to justify a range of contradictory opinions across the political spectrum in Weimar Germany.

One must ask why Fichte’s work is so malleable to such a wide range of political ideologies, even to contradictory positions.
The best example of writings from this era was undoubtedly Fichte und Deutschlands Not ("Fichte and Germany’s Suffering"). Published under the name “From One Who Loves Germany” in 1919, the author’s choice to publish anonymously reflected his political ideas and self-image as a humble servant of the German nation. The author served with the Imperial German Army on the Eastern Front during the First World War, where he witnessed the collapse of the army in Riga, present-day Latvia, in 1918, an experience which clearly made a lasting impact on him. The author belonged to a young generation of German nationalists known as the Conservative Revolutionaries who experienced their formative years in the trenches of the First World War, felt humiliated by Germany’s defeat, but saw opportunity in the end of the old Wilhelmine monarchy. The challenge for the young generation, they believed, was to create a “new nationalism.” This political movement was characterized by an aggressive style, military organization, and strict hierarchy and found political unity in its vehement opposition to democracy, socialism, and communism. In many ways, the Conservative Revolutionaries can be considered predecessors of fascism. The author of Fichte und Deutschlands Not focused almost entirely on Fichte’s Addresses, elevating them to the status of a near-divine text for Germans to engulf themselves in. The thrust of the book’s argument rests in its first two sentences:

Fichte’s Addresses to the German Nation deserve, now more than ever, the attention of all Germans. Not as a curiosity that attracts us for days or hours, but as a book of life, as our German Bible, in which we cannot deepen ourselves too often or too seriously.

The author went so far to directly compare the Addresses to Christianity’s sacred text, revealing the deep influence of religion on nationalist rhetoric and an active effort to elevate the nation to holiness. While the author of Fichte und Deutschlands Not conceded that the Addresses were well known, he insisted that their truer and deepest meaning of national rebirth had been lost on the masses. The task fell to Germans to discover the true meaning of the Addresses, and awaken within themselves the spirit of the nation. The author’s vision of the nation as an immortal object of dedication and sacrifice which places tremendous burden upon the citizen stands in marked contrast to Fichte’s own vision for the nation as a beacon of truth and a vehicle for the moral and spiritual enlightenment of the individual and of humankind. Fichte’s firm commitment to republican ideals made him difficult to invoke to support the author’s anti-democratic conviction. To square the circle, the author asserted that Fichte’s democratic spirit was “strong” and “proud,” as opposed to Weimar’s “flabby” and “bourgeoisie” nature.

In light of his vehement opposition to liberalism, democracy, and socialism, the author’s calls to become “German in Fichte’s meaning of the word” meant wholeheartedly embracing Fichte as a prophet of nationalism. By seeking to establish the Addresses to the German Nation as a kind of holy book of the nation that would uplift and inspire Germans in their daily lives, the anonymous author sought to glorify Fichte as a timeless and fervent hero to the German nation and as a progenitor to the fascist movement.

The Völkisch Movement, Religion, and Fichte
The powerful and conservative Völkisch movement in Germany also came to embrace Johann Gottlieb Fichte in criticizing the Weimar Republic and advocating for a traditional, religious, and intensely conservative society in Germany. With a romantic focus on folklore and ethnicity, the Völkisch movement shared elements in common with the American Populist movement. Finding strength in the rural areas, the Völkisch movement combined utopianism with a reactionary spirit. As historian Petteri Pietkäinen observed, “Völkisch ideology was not a coherent set of ideas and ideals but rather a cauldron of beliefs, fears and hopes that found expression in various movements and were often articulated in an emotional tone.” Originally a nationalist reaction against industrialization, urbanization, and Progressivism that flourished in the 1870s, the movement gained strength in the interwar years. Supporters of Völkisch movement did not seek political means to address its concerns, but instead focused on the spiritual needs of the Volk. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke argued, the Völkisch movement drew its strength from “the delayed political unification of Germany” and “a widespread romantic reaction to modernity.” While diverse, the
various elements of the movement shared a patriotic interest in German folklore, local history, and an anti-urban revolt against modernity. Fichte was embraced by the Völkisch movement, particularly so in the interwar years, as a source of inspiration and a justification for their vision of German society.

An influential Völkisch leader by the name of Helmuth Johnsen connected Fichte to the movement, using him to promote a pious, Protestant, and populist vision of German society. After serving in the First World War, Johnsen became an evangelical bishop in a rural region north of Nuremberg, a leader in the Völkisch movement, a popular activist. An early supporter of Adolf Hitler, Johnsen volunteered as the local coordinator for Hitler’s march to Berlin, a dramatic political feat modeled on Mussolini’s March on Rome that was supposed to follow the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich 1923. Johnsen saw Fichte as a powerful figure who could justify his religious and anti-Semitic worldview, using him widely and regularly in his speeches, sermons, and writings. Fichte became so central to his thought that Johnsen dedicated his doctoral thesis in philosophy to the philosopher. While the thesis was not all that widely circulated, it provides a thorough account of Johnsen’s portrayal and interpretation of Fichte that was widely disseminated within the Völkisch movement.

Part philosophy, part history, part biography, Johnsen’s thesis follows the interplay between Fichte’s personal and philosophical development, with specific focus on Fichte’s role in the development of German thought and political philosophy. Published in 1929, Johnsen’s portrayal focuses on more than Fichte’s Addresses to the German Nation alone, but places strong emphasis on Fichte’s patriotism throughout, downplaying Fichte's liberal and socialist lines of thought.

Johnsen framed Fichte as the heroic answer to the moral and existential shock that faced Germans in the wake of defeat and crisis that followed the war. Out of the depths and darkness of despair, Johnsen, like many other writers during this time, offered Fichte as the best solution. More than Fichte’s ideas, philosophy, or worldview, Johnsen saw the man himself as a larger-than-life hero who could inspire and uplift the struggling souls of the nation:

“He was in a period that is similar to ours in many ways, and has been a truly guiding personality—upright and brave before the enemy, true to himself in action and inaction, thorough in his knowledge and research, humble before God, well aware of the contrast between human values and action. His shining example of a heroic life encompassed insightful scholarship and unceasing joy of work.”

That passage exemplifies the intentional, conscious effort to cultivate the image of Fichte as a national hero. By enshrining Fichte’s personality over his thought and his actions over his ideas, Johnsen pulled Fichte away from his role as thinker and philosopher and made him a tool in the contemporary political battle. In order to cultivate a shared sense of identity and belonging to the nation, Johnsen sought to raise the greats of German history far above ordinary Germans. Heroes were to shine from the heavens as guiding stars for soul of the nation.

Johnsen embraced the Führerprinzip, the principle that a strong, driving leader should guide the nation. This thought originated in conservative and proto-fascist circles as part of the total rejection of democratic systems. Johnsen argued that Fichte should become the moral guide for the German nation in much the same way that a powerful leader should lead the state. He wrote, “May Fichte be the Führer and teacher of our Volk in the necessary renewal of its life- and worldview to ease the despair of our fatherland.” This passage provides clear insight into Johnsen’s vision of reform in Germany and reveals his obsession with power. One’s politics were not simply an opinion in Johnsen’s eyes, but a “moral obligation” to embrace his ideals of humanity. Throughout his work, Johnsen exaggerated Fichte’s Christian belief, manipulating his portrayal of Fichte in order to promote his own vision for a conservative, Christian, Völkisch Germany.

**Fichte and National Socialism**

Perhaps no individual has more wrongly misappropriated Fichte than Ernst Bergmann, who saw in him a direct progenitor of National Socialism. As professor of philosophy at the University of Leipzig, Bergmann developed a philosophical system which connected religion, race, and national awakening. After joining the Nazi Party in 1930, Bergmann earned the distinction of becoming the party’s chief philosopher. Convinced that Jewish influence in Christianity was “destroying the German soul,” he argued that Germans should create a national church based on popular mysticism and Nordic mythology. Ernst Bergmann embraced Johann Gottlieb Fichte as a national hero and claimed him as a forerunner to National Socialism.

Bergmann published his first book on Fichte as part of the campaign designed to rally support for the war effort during World War I. Bergmann delivered a series of lectures on Fichte in 1932 which he went on to publish as Fichte und der Nationalsozialismus (“Fichte and National Socialism”). Primarily a work of propaganda, Fichte und der Nationalsozialismus epitomized the historical misappropriation and abuse of Fichte and his writings for political motives and portrayed Fichte as the forefather of National Socialism.

In Fichte und der Nationalsozialismus, Bergmann harkened back to past moments of crisis, glorified Fichte as a great leader of German history, and called upon Germans to rise up to the standard set by the glories of national heroes past. Like his contemporaries on the right wing of the political spectrum, Bergmann portrayed the crisis of Weimar society as a transformational moment and “turning point” in history which required Germans to look back to German heroes of the past. According to Bergmann, the political and economic crises that engulfed German society after World War I demonstrated the corruption of liberal democracy, which could only be solved through the strong leadership of National Socialism. Invoking national heroes and describing previous times of trial for the nation added gravity and a seeming stoic legitimacy to Bergmann’s blatantly political claims. Bergmann recounted and exaggerated Fichte’s achievements, going so far as to say that the realization of Fichte’s dream of a national education system helped to “resurrect the nation’s soul.” As Bergmann argued, Fichte’s greatness afforded him a “unique position” in German history:

> Should the claim of “native born,” which National Socialism applied to the cultural manifestations of a people also be carried over to philosophy? One may and should try, but one will find hardly any
other German thinker whose system so unambiguously bears the stamp of a German national philosophy on its face like that of our Fichte.23

According to Bergmann, both Fichte and National Socialism tapped into the “unfathomable depths of the German spirit,” and thus shared the same purpose. Just as the National Socialist movement measured other aspects of culture and politics by the degree to which they were “native-born,” Bergmann applied the same metric to philosophy, finding in Fichte a convenient figure to justify his own ideas and vision. Bergmann went even further in arguing that Fichte played a pivotal role in the development of National Socialism, writing

“Regarding Fichte as the first major precursor [to National Socialism] is not unjustified.”24

Such a reading, however, ignores Fichte’s other writings and aspirations. Fichte’s version of nationalism was inherently tied to cosmopolitanism and support for a League of Nations more than a century before its creation. Fichte did not claim that the Germans were superior, but that they possessed a unique spiritual and historical position. Fichte’s nation was not one intended for competition and combat with others, but rather the vehicle for moral, spiritual, and philosophical improvement of those within the nation. Fichte’s cosmopolitan desire for the improvement of mankind began with a national desire for the improvement of the German nation. Bergmann engaged only briefly with Fichte’s liberal and socialist thought, which largely contradicted his own beliefs, and argued that Fichte’s nationalism and socialism came to a natural fruition in the National Socialist movement.25 This substantial omission reveals Ernst Bergmann’s attempt to claim Fichte as a forerunner to National Socialism as a concerted effort at cherry-picking passages from Fichte. In so doing, Bergmann created a caricature of a purely nationalist Fichte that was detached from the man and his thinking.

Bergmann believed Nazism and Marxism were engaged in a titanic battle to control the future. Bergmann saw Fichte as a central figure in this ideological battle, going far enough to call him “the moral conqueror of Marxism.”26 Bergmann missed the profound irony of his claim. Just as Fichte was venerated by nationalists of the right as a national hero and committed patriot, so too was he celebrated by socialists for fighting for the people and advancing socialist thought. Bergmann would have been shocked to learn that one of the greatest collections of Fichte’s writings resided in the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, where, since before Bergmann’s time, he has been celebrated as a socialist and revolutionary.27 Seeking to strengthen support for the Nazi party and its ideological vision, Bergmann omitted those aspects of Fichte which did not conform to his preferred portrayal of the national hero.

Ernst Bergmann’s relentless effort to portray Fichte as a forerunner to the National Socialism exemplified the misappropriation of Fichte’s political and historical role to support a radically conservative agenda. Bergmann advanced a familiar, though deeply flawed, image of Fichte as an ardent patriot, early nationalist, and timeless hero of the nation. Bergmann added the novel and profound claims that Fichte was a direct forerunner to National Socialism and that Fichte was the moral conqueror of Marxism. Both of these claims followed in the line of thinking promoted by the previous two writers, but they represent the ultimate fruition of the effort to claim Fichte, a cosmopolitan and republican philosopher, as a forerunner to and hero of the most xenophobic, destructive, nationalist parties and regimes the world has ever known.

Visions of the National Hero

Though the details vary among the authors on the right, a shared image emerges from their writings that is vehemently nationalistic, staunchly against the Weimar democratic system, fiercely anti-socialist, and that portrays Fichte as a forerunner to fascism. All three authors intentionally contributed to the mythos around Fichte as a national hero, and invoked him to support their own political visions. Just as fascism came to dominance, so too did the portrayal of Fichte as prophet of an extreme and aggressive version of nationalism. Through the curtailing of political and academic freedom, that portrayal became the only one.

A substantial debate emerged in the scholarship on the strength of the connection between Fichte and National Socialism that has not to this day been wholly resolved. On one side, scholars such as Timothy Ryback have argued that Fichte was in fact the philosopher closest to National Socialism in tone and spirit. In Hitler’s Private Library, Ryback drew parallels between Fichte and Hitler in calling for an overthrow of the political elite, drumming up support for a people’s war, and dreaming for the unity of the German people.28 Some truth can certainly be found in this reading, and one can find powerful and haunting echoes of Fichte’s philosophy and writings in the National Socialist movement. In addition, Fichte continued in a line of anti-Semitic German and, for that matter, European, thinking by arguing against Jewish emancipation in 1793 and claiming that Jews made up a state within a state that would undermine the German nation.29 One must be careful not to give Fichte too kind a treatment, but on the other hand, one also risks conflating Fichte with the deeply flawed portrayal advanced by vehement nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ryback’s portrayal of Fichte as the philosophical forerunner to National Socialism is a treatment not dissimilar to that offered by Ernst Bergmann.

By using his name and cherry-picking from his writings, Nazi leaders bent Fichte to their image and, in so doing, gave authority to their own movement. In “Fichte’s Contribution to German Nationalism,” Thomas Zingales argued that Hitler’s movement was in no way based on Fichte’s philosophy. Hitler overlooked Fichte’s cosmopolitan and transcendental spirit, making only a shallow attempt to legitimize the Nazi movement with the veneer of a philosophical system.30

Fichte fiercely criticized the Blutgemeinschaft idea that was so central to Hitler’s ideas of race and nation, arguing instead that language formed a much stronger bond of national identity than blood ever could. Fichte also criticized nationalism of the land or soil, which he saw as the basest and most hollow form of patriotism.31 Further, Fichte did not at any point consider National Socialism’s “racial purity” in his work. Fichte did not consider it possible, necessary, nor even productive for German national unity.32 As scholar F.W. Kaufmann argued in his article, “Fichte and National Socialism,” even Fichte’s most nationalistic writings were “not a prophecy of German racial preeminence, but a challenge to take the lead in responsible world-citizenship.”33 We must also remember that, according to Fichte, the nation was merely a vehicle
for spiritual and moral progress, one that may at some point lose its usefulness. This stands in sharp contrast to the dreams of fierce nationalists, for whom the realization of the nation was the end in and of itself. The spirit of Fichte’s work, if not its tone, was antithetical to National Socialism.

Certain aspects of Fichte’s writings were particularly susceptible to misappropriation. In addition to his nationalism and passionate rhetoric, Fichte’s elevation of Germanness to a metaphysical essence and his nationally oriented vision of socialism appealed to these leaders. Less conservative than the Hegelians and more passionate than the Kantians, Fichte provided just the right combination of philosophical justification, populist appeal, and ideological malleability to make a compelling patron saint of National Socialism. Despite being susceptible to misappropriation, Fichte was not a forerunner to National Socialism; Nazi leaders deeply misrepresented him and his ideas to make him appear so.

Perhaps the clearest lesson from this study of Fichte is the profound malleability of nationalism as a political ideology. Through careful emphasis and omission, writers actively manipulated portrayals of Fichte to justify an extremist and destructive ideology. Since nationalism is not bound to any particular doctrine or model of organizing politics, society, or the economy, it can be harnessed by a wide range of interests. Nationalism does not require sound logic, but only passionate intensity. Even the most dangerous ideology can gain credibility by bending national symbols, heroes, and rhetoric to its will. Movements that seek to legitimize themselves through the use of national rhetoric therefore deserve the deepest skepticism.

References
2. Reden an die deutsche Nation in the Original German.
7. ”Von einem, der Deutschland lieb hat” in the original German.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 6.
14. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 6.
18. Ibid., 5.
22. Ibid., Vorwort.
23. Ibid., 6.
24. Ibid., 7.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 8.
31. Meinecke, Cosmopolitanism and the National State, 73.
32. Engelbrecht, Fichte: A Study of his Political Writings, 153.

Michael Albada graduated from Stanford in June 2011 with a degree in history. Originally from a small town north of San Francisco, Michael is currently serving as an AmeriCorps member at a charter school in East Palo Alto. Next year, he will be leaving California to teach high school math in Philadelphia and try to close the achievement gap with Teach for America. In his free time, Michael enjoys skiing, hiking, playing bass, and exploring the Bay Area.