



Revolution and Reflection: Intellectual Change in Germany during the 1850's

A. Lees

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THE PROBLEM AND THE APPROACH The abortive revolutions of 1848 have been widely regarded by historians as a watershed not only in the political but also in the intellectual development of modern Europe. Before 1848, according to the traditional view, the prevalent climate of opinion was idealistic, hopeful, humane, and progressive. Afterwards, it was empirical, pessimistic, cynical, and obsessed with power. As Hans Kohn put it in his essay "Mid-century: The Turning Point," "In 1848 the foundations of Western civilization - intellectual belief in the objectivity of truth and justice, ethical faith in mercy and tolerance - were still unshaken. . . . In the spring of 1848 mankind was full of glowing hope, but the end of 1848 dashed the hopes, and the century which 1848 inaugurated appears to have led slowly but surely to decay and disaster. " 1 Germany, a prime culprit in the debacle which marked the last third of that century, has been seen as the country in which the events of 1848-49 had the most profound impact. Although few historians have gone as far as Kohn in linking the failures experienced by mid-nineteenth-century Germans to the horrors perpetrated by some of their twentieth-century descendants, it has long been common to think of Germany's response to her defeated revolution as a process of attitudinal preparation for Otto von Bismarck's authoritarian solution to the national question in the period between 1864 and 1871 - which in turn was fraught with ominous long-range significance.

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