

Muttersprache and Vaterland: Language and Nationalism in 19th Century Germany

Martin Durrell, University of Manchester

It is widely accepted that nineteenth-century German nationalism was essentially ethnolinguistic, based on the premise that the existence of a common language (and thus a *Sprachnation*) justified aspirations to a *Staatsnation*. In a metaphor current at the time, the language was the *Band* – and possibly the only one – which linked all Germans. A number of narratives emerged to sustain this construct in the course of the nineteenth century, notably based on the notion that the German people had been conscious of the unity of this language called *deutsch* for over a thousand years – in effect back to the first written records and the Carolingian empire, which itself had been the first unified German state. A ‘history of the German language’ was then established to underpin this assumption of historical unity. However, if the nation is an “imagined community”, then its basis was in this case an “imagined language”, since *Hochdeutsch* is a “cultural artefact” which had only emerged through typical processes of linguistic standardization in the 18th century, and the reality of linguistic variation and change was ignored or explained away. Nevertheless, as will be shown, many of the myths and false assumptions associated with linguistic nationalism have proved remarkably persistent through to the present day.