

Citizens of the World—The Idea of Europe

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In 1789, the first year of the French Revolution, Friedrich Schiller gave his inaugural address at the university of Jena. He asked his student audience (and, with it, the whole of humanity): ‘What is universal history and to what end does one study it?’ With rhetorical aplomb, he discussed this basic question before remarking briefly that the ‘realm of history ... embraces the whole moral world.’¹ History, for Schiller, is a human and moral, not a national, issue. He went on to paint an ideal picture of the present: ‘The boundaries which states and nations set up in their hostility and egoism have been pierced. All reflective men today are joined as citizens of the world.’²

Schiller’s ideas were rooted in the cosmopolitan broadmindedness of the Enlightenment and the pre-Revolutionary community of European intellectuals. From a distance of two centuries it is easy to see how quickly such notions lost currency. The French Revolution soon became a motor of unprecedented national insularity, because the states and peoples of Europe completely redefined their patriotic values as a result of being forced to defend themselves against French expansionism. Patriotism and nationalism merged, causing the things that nations had in common to disappear from view. Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, during the era of Metternich and the restoration in France, Schiller’s optimistic claim that ‘the European society of states seems transformed into a great family’ appeared far from the truth.³

A decade after Schiller gave his speech, with its basis in classical humanism, in 1799 the early Romantic author Novalis wrote *Die Christenheit oder Europa: Ein Fragment* (Christendom or Europe: A Fragment), a text that opposes the closed form of the classical rationalist—the public address—with the open, deliberately fragmentary form of the Romantic. However different the statements and standpoints of these two authors, they point in the same direction. Novalis projects his ideal of the state onto a Middle Ages seen as a period of peace under the aegis of the Church, and he appeals to the present’s sense of duty by calling on his contemporaries to lay the foundations of a Europe existing in harmony and (confessional) unity, a Europe above materialism and egoism and without antagonisms and conflicts.

For all its rapid economic and technological development, the nineteenth century after the Napoleonic Wars, though not spared war itself, experienced no conflicts comparably far-reaching in terms of mentality to the Thirty Years’ War or in terms of savage destruction to the First and Second World Wars. Although bilateral territorial and hege-