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# On the Origins of National Identity

## Abstract

The formation of „national identities“, where individuals increasingly valued their membership in a national community, was a phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We explore the origins of a „national identity“ in Germany and its spread to become a mass-phenomenon before the First World War. We construct a new panel data-set on more than 1.2 million first names that parents gave their children to elicit changes in identities between 1800 and 1900. Our main finding is that the collapse of Napoleon in 1813 triggered a wave of enthusiasm for Germany, with lasting effects. We exploit *within family* variation to estimate how the events of 1813/14 changed the identity of parents as reflected in their decisions about given names. We find that parents in cities that became part of Prussia and parents with a middle class background started to give their children names of German(ic) origin. Further, we can show that first names had remarkable predictive power for behaviour in terms of marriages and active involvement during both, the German-French War in 1870/71 and the First World War. We conclude that the popular rise against Napoleon under Prussian leadership was crucial for the formation of a German national identity.

(joint with Felix Kersting)