

# Taking the Measure of National Greatness: Georg Brandes's Condemnation of German Imperialism

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Nineteenth-century European scientists were preoccupied with the question of measuring the physical world, dividing it into cubits and fractions and square kilometers. At the same time, politicians, philosophers, generals, and kings were interested in measuring the world in terms of national importance, prestige, and power. This mania for measuring led to arms races and skirmishes over colonies, literary feuds, and tavern fistfights, but rarely provided a clear-cut answer to the question how national greatness can be calculated. Germany is often said to have become a Great Power in the nineteenth century, but the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes's critique of German imperialism, in particular its treatment of the Danish minority population of Schleswig-Holstein, took the measure of Germany's (emergent) national greatness and found it wanting. In Brandes's view, the same traits and actions that bolstered Germany's national pride violated universal values of human rights and diminished Germany's stature.

The victory of the numerically superior, better-armed German troops over the Danes at the battle of Dybbøl/Düppel on April 18, 1864, was neither unexpected nor completely decisive in determining the outcome of the Second Schleswig war, but it represented a significant milestone on the path to German unification and establishment of the second German Empire. As German textbooks would later instruct generations of schoolchildren, "Ohne Düppel, kein Königgratz; ohne Königgratz, kein Sedan; ohne Sedan, kein deutsches Kaiserreich" (Adriansen 257). The victory over Denmark confirmed not only Prussia's military prowess but also its commitment to an autocratic form of government.

Prior to the outbreak of the war with Denmark, Prussia had been headed for civil war over the question of whether mandatory military service should last two or three years. Although the issue may seem trivial today, the issue of military service symbolized a far more fundamental debate about Prussia's political system—whether the country should be ruled by a military regime

or a liberal democratic government. The conflict had divided the Prussian parliament and public to such an extent that King Wilhelm I warned his minister president, Otto von Bismarck, after the liberal victory in the parliamentary elections of October 1863 that the masses “would soon raise a guillotine” (Buk-Swienty 147) for him in the palace square, as the French had done for their king three-quarters of a century earlier. When the Danes adopted a new constitution in November 1863 that violated the terms of the London Protocol that had ended the First Schleswig War in 1852, Bismarck saved his job and perhaps King Wilhelm’s head by carrying off the diplomatic masterstroke of lulling the Danes into believing that Prussia would accept this new constitution while using the prospect of war to push through the military reform bill and requisition the funds to outfit and fortify the Prussian army. In January 1864, Bismarck got his war and Prussia was set on course to prove its military might as a Great Power alongside England and France.

The Prussian army’s successes on the battlefield against Denmark brought both territorial and psychological gains for Germany’s sense of national greatness. Signed on October 30, 1864, the Treaty of Vienna formalized the transfer of the provinces of Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenburg, which together made up nearly one third of the population of the Danish empire and 40% of its territory, to Prussia and Austria. The treaty placed Schleswig under Prussian administration and Holstein under Austrian control, thereby setting the stage for the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, which was ostensibly triggered by disputes over the administration of the two provinces. Prussia’s victory in that war led directly to the dissolution of the German Confederation, the subsequent establishment of the Northern German Confederation, and finally the enactment, in 1871, of the *Kleindeutsche Lösung*, which entailed the unification of the various German states, except for Austria, Luxembourg, and Liechtenstein, into a single, large country.

The annexation of Schleswig and Holstein simultaneously validated and complicated Germany’s status as an ethnically homogenous, unified nation-state. On one hand, the acquisition of Holstein and southern Schleswig satisfied the demands of nationalism by bringing the region’s German-speaking inhabitants into the German fold and expanding Germany’s territory and population. On the other hand, the minority population of Danish speakers in northern Schleswig complicated the linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the German nation-state, which Bismarck would have preferred to avoid. The majority of the inhabitants of Holstein and southern Schleswig had traditionally been German speakers who were eager, in 1864, to ally themselves more closely with other German territories (though they had hoped to achieve independence rather than annexation), but northern Schleswig was home to a decidedly Danish-oriented population that regarded annexation by Prussia as a threat to its cultural and linguistic identity. German efforts during the final decades of the nineteenth century to “Germanize” the Danish minority in

Schleswig, which were implemented with varying degrees of severity, not only aroused spirited opposition and outspoken criticism both within the province itself and in Denmark, but also undermined Germany's efforts to position itself as a cosmopolitan, imperial player on the stage of world politics and thus its claim to exemplify "universal" Enlightenment values.

In the decades following German unification, Georg Brandes (1842–1927) emerged as one of the most visible and outspoken critics of the way in which Germany's heavy-handed efforts at enforcing Germanness on the Danish population of Schleswig prioritized the national over the universal and measured Germany's greatness in terms of its power to repress and destroy. Although representative of a peripheral European country and writing in a minor language, Brandes was a ubiquitous participant in European cultural and socio-political discourse throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was perhaps uniquely qualified to evaluate Germany's often-tortured navigation between the desire to be regarded as cosmopolitan and the highly nationalistic rhetoric of German political culture in the years leading up to World War I. Born in 1842, Brandes grew up in Denmark during one of the most tumultuous periods of modern Danish history, during which the competing demands of cosmopolitanism and nationalism nearly tore the country apart. He made an international reputation for himself in the 1870s and 80s as the driving force behind Scandinavia's Modern Breakthrough and was widely read and quite influential in Germany. He lived in Berlin from 1877 to 1881, published extensively, traveled incessantly, and was well-connected within German intellectual, literary, and artistic circles, not to mention highly dependent on the income from his German-language publications.

Although German nationalism ran high in the 1860s and 70s, the fact that Germany had won the war of 1864, combined with its need for new literary impulses to exemplify its new national culture, created a receptive climate in Germany for the Scandinavian modernism that Brandes was promoting. The resulting popularity of Nordic authors such as Henrik Ibsen and Jens Peter Jacobsen, the use of Scandinavian pseudonyms such as Bjarne P. Holmsen by German writers, and the emergence of German Naturalism that claimed Scandinavian realism as its foundation testify to the success of Brandes's efforts and the viability of Scandinavian modernism as an international phenomenon.

Brandes's literary successes and influence in Germany, at a time when anti-German sentiment in Denmark was prevalent, aroused the ire of his countrymen. Denmark's politically humbling transformation from a multinational empire to a (nearly) ethnically homogenous nation-state underscored its vulnerability *vis à vis* Germany. Anger over Prussia's victory, the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein, and fear of being subsumed politically and culturally into the rapidly expanding German Empire pushed anti-German attitudes and

Danish nationalism to extremes. During parliamentary discussions of the peace treaty in late 1864, politician Alfred Hage warned that not only was Denmark's political independence endangered but its national identity as well; he prophesied that Denmark would slowly be "consumed by Germanness, by a Germanness that is unfortunately already far too widespread in all of Denmark, a Germanness that weakens us and steals our marrow and bone, and which is the cause of the whole terrible condition in which we find ourselves" (Neergaard 1532). Even as German audiences and authors embraced Scandinavian realism, however, the German administrators of Schleswig-Holstein became increasingly harsh in their attempts to eradicate Danish culture and language in the annexed territories in an attempt to enforce German national ideals and create a homogenous national culture. Beginning in the 1890s, Brandes turned his attention from literature to political philosophy and human rights, speaking out in defense of oppressed minority groups ranging from Jews in Poland to Armenians in Turkey, as well as the plight of the Danish minority in Schleswig-Holstein.

Germany's repressive treatment of the Danish minority in Schleswig-Holstein reflects its attempts to present itself as a Great Power on par with its rivals in the decades leading up to the outbreak of World War I. Competition for colonies, both as sources of raw materials for import and as markets for exporting finished goods, led to an arms race between Germany and Britain and played a role in triggering armed conflicts between colonizers and colonized peoples, including the Greco-Turkish war of 1897, the Spanish-American war of 1898, and the Anglo-Boer wars of 1880–81 and 1899–1902, as well as the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. Although economic concerns played a central role in these conflicts, they were also physical enactments of implicit battles over the cultural hegemony upon which imperialism and colonialism implicitly rely for legitimacy. The self-deceptive nature of nationalism demanded that colonial experiments validate the superiority of the colonizing power's culture, not simply its greater military might.

It was in this minefield of cultural politics that Brandes began publicly criticizing German imperialism, not just as it manifested itself in Schleswig-Holstein but also throughout the world. He decried attempts to measure Germany's greatness in terms of military might, colonial reach, economic productivity, nationalistic rhetoric, and enforced cultural homogeneity as poor substitutes for the universal Enlightenment values that had previously formed the core of German elite culture. When 130,000 German volunteers embarked for China on July 27, 1900, to defend Germany's wounded honor against the Chinese rebels, Kaiser Wilhelm's send-off speech employed precisely the kind of extreme nationalist rhetoric that Brandes abhorred. Attributing Germany's accomplishments to the Christian foundation of its culture, the Kaiser charged the troops with the task of making the superiority of both Christianity

and the name of Germany known in China by emulating Attila the Hun's merciless brutality and utterly destroying their opponents.

In response, Brandes published a scathing denouncement of the Kaiser's Hun speech, in which he points out that Chinese culture could hardly build upon a much younger religion, such as Christianity is relative to Chinese tradition. He also questions the unlikely endorsement of Attila the Hun's brutal tactics in the name of Christianity, noting that "it has not previously been thought that a culture based on Christianity must necessarily completely eradicate its enemies, whom an apparently outdated doctrine instructs them to love" (Brandes, "Hunnertalen" 75). Brandes goes on to condemn the militarization of the German people and warn that a nation that values inflammatory rhetoric and well-tailored uniforms above reason will come to grief (77). In Brandes's opinion, the perversion of nationalism in the manner demonstrated so starkly by Kaiser Wilhelm on this occasion posed a major threat to the universalist Enlightenment values underpinning both German and European culture.

In his commentary on the Hun speech, Brandes noted sardonically, "The new century, which holds such promise, will apparently show that the old methods used by rulers 1200–1000 years ago to bring about the honor of God and the happiness of mankind are still in full force" (Brandes 76). This assessment articulates Brandes's fear that nationalist excesses and rampant militarism would arrest or even reverse the modernization of European society, as well as causing great human suffering. He was particularly concerned about the narrowing of cultural horizons brought about by national self-glorification—in short, the negation of cosmopolitanism—and the destructive consequences of inflammatory, racially-based nationalist rhetoric about the supremacy of one nation above others. Decades before the outbreak of World War I, Brandes predicted that the continued cultivation of nationalistic pipe dreams would lead to both a prolonged, devastating cultural crisis and an equally drawn-out, destructive physical war.

Brandes's political views were anchored in the bourgeois liberalism that motivated the European revolutions of 1848, an ideology pervaded by suspicion of democracy and socialism but committed to the empowerment of the common man by means of expanded personal freedoms and economic opportunities. Brandes regarded the ideological dangers of nationalism and imperialism as threatening to humankind as a whole, not just the countries currently perpetrating harm against minority groups. His brand of cosmopolitan nationalism privileges the "universal" conception of the nation as a civic union in which the rights of heterogeneous ethnic groups must be protected by the state to which they belong, regardless of that state's dominant linguistic and ethnic identity. In his 1894 speech "On National Sentiment" Brandes described nationalism as the inverse of patriotism, manifested as "a nation's

aggressive assertiveness at the expense of other peoples and races” (Nordby 142). It was against this destructive form of nationalism that Brandes became a crusader, driven by the hope that Denmark could be in the vanguard of socio-political reform and humanitarianism and embody liberal ideals to the world. Thomas Nordby explains, “For Brandes, national sentiment implied a more comprehensive national loyalty, not least with regard to the tradition of liberal rights and freedoms that had, among other things, been concretized in the June Constitution [of 1849]” (139). In response to critics who disparaged his loyalty to his homeland, Brandes insisted that his life and works demonstrated his patriotism in this broader sense.

A decade later, in a speech given on the island of Møn in 1904, Brandes explicitly linked the personal and national dimensions of identity, articulating the connection he saw between his activism and his love of his homeland and challenging his Danish listeners to live up to his expectations by demonstrating a global consciousness:

All people feel great enthusiasm for their fatherland. [...] It is also a natural form of patriotism to praise a country’s people, laud its accomplishments, and glorify its past. Yet this is not the highest form of patriotism. [...] It is . . . more important to develop a sense of freedom and justice among the people, not just for its own use. [...] Thus it was my ideal, it should be known that, despite the small size of our country, men lived here who felt sympathy with all wronged individuals or oppressed peoples across the world and who lifted their voices, spoke on their behalf. [...] All Poles and Finns, Ruthenians, Georgians, Armenians should know that freedom and justice lived in Denmark. [...] This is modern patriotism. (Brandes, “Tale på Møn” 443)

In his own opinion, Brandes’s insistence on the value of each individual human life, his support for every oppressed minority in its struggle for human rights, was a deeply patriotic act that reflected his Danish identity and values. In contrast to the desire for cultural hegemony demonstrated by the great powers, Denmark should distinguish itself by acknowledging and defending marginalized peoples. Brandes’s biographer Jørgen Knudsen points out the intrinsic link between Brandes’s well-known advocacy of free thinking and his less-discussed support for the freedom of self-determination, noting that, for Brandes, “it was not enough to work for the freedom of the spirit; what mattered was working for the liberation of the nations’ individualities” (Knudsen 351). In Brandes’s view, freedom required action, not merely philosophical discussion and the espousal of abstract ideals.

Yet in an era of national unification, expansive nationalist political agendas, and intense pressure to conform to increasingly rigid national ideals, Brandes’s task must have seemed futile. Not only was he speaking as the representative of a politically insignificant nation, but he often found himself in the position of undermining his own hard-won popularity, particularly in Germany, by voicing unpopular opinions. However, although he recognized

his own and his country's relative powerlessness in a global context, Brandes seemed to relish the challenge posed by occupying such a disadvantageous position. Brandes's personality and biography are riddled with paradoxes, not least of which is his combination of hard-bitten realism and incorrigible idealism, as well as his passionate engagement on behalf of specific national groups while shunning the self-aggrandizing tendencies of nationalism.

Well aware of the powerful economic and ideological forces used to justify the oppressive treatment of minority peoples across Europe, Brandes nevertheless made it a priority to denounce such treatment as often and as publicly as possible, regardless of the acceptability of his views to those in power. He was not a proponent of armed insurrection, but he did support minority groups that challenged the cultural hegemony of the groups dominating them, affirming their fundamental right to cultivate and maintain their own culture. He was highly sensitive to the dangers implicit in the ideologies of racial constructs and hierarchies that emerged as a result of heightened nationalism, particularly the resurgence of anti-Semitism that affected him personally. On occasion, Brandes found himself on the side of the oppressor, for example in opposing Iceland's desire to gain independence from Denmark, which Brandes feared would further diminish Denmark's international prestige. However, Brandes's own fallibility aside, the aim of his provocative proclamations remained constant: to combat "the hatred of truth," which, he warned, often masquerades as "politeness, consideration, tact, piety, patriotism, and sparing other people's beliefs" (Grössel 173).

As the turn of the century marked both the global saturation point of European imperialism and the increasing probability of an eventual global conflict over limited resources and markets, there was no dearth of work to be done, both for Brandes himself and for the countrymen he hoped to motivate. In an 1899 speech entitled "Thoughts at the Turn of the Century" [*Tanker ved Aarhundredeskiftet*], Brandes warned,

The great powers are dividing the globe among themselves. They strive to do this as peacefully as possible, to the extent that they would like to avoid a world war. Yet they do it very ruthlessly all the same, because they sacrifice for the sake of their economic advantage not only those unhappy peoples whom they subjugate with fire and the sword and all such horrors, but also all of the smaller peoples round about who are swallowed up for the sake of national unity or used as objects of barter or handed over to brutalization so that peace can be preserved. Thus, with the consent of Christian Europe, the Sultan had 300,000 Armenians murdered. We have seen Poland sacrificed and forgotten, have now also experienced Finland's demise, and observed the spread of political coarseness in southern Jutland. (Brandes, "Tanker" 144–145)

Brandes recognized that many of the atrocities being committed in the name of nationalism actually served to further the economic aims of the more powerful country or ethnic group. Throughout his political writings, he reminds



his readers repeatedly that political expediency, not morality, determines the actions governments undertake, but individuals have no such justification for tolerating or perpetrating injustice. True greatness was to be measured in ethical rather than economic terms.

Defending the cause of oppressed minority groups was not an arbitrary decision on Brandes's part, but was rooted in his awareness of his own country's precarious position in Europe. Having experienced Denmark's defeat and the German occupation of much of Jutland after the Second Schleswig War as a young man in 1864, Brandes was familiar with both the resulting decline in Denmark's national prestige and the growing tensions between German and Danish speakers in the former Danish provinces. As the German government's treatment of the Danes in Schleswig became increasingly oppressive, Brandes became a partisan for the Danes' rights to retain their ancestral language and culture. He did not hesitate to champion their cause, even in the German capital itself. At a farewell gathering of 100 prominent writers, politicians, artists, and nobility held in his honor at Hotel Kaiserhof in Berlin on February 1, 1883, Brandes used the occasion to protest the conscription of Danish citizens into the German army, which had had the effect of forcing young Danish men to flee their farms:

My heart shrivels in my chest, when I think, that even now, as I voluntarily leave Germany, hundreds of Danish citizens like me, the sons of North Schleswig peasants, who believed that they had a right to live on the land where they were born, must involuntarily and without fanfare leave the country. I don't dare to speak to the legal question, but Germany seems to me to be strong enough to be able to demonstrate magnanimity. (qtd. in Knudsen 207)

The fact that Danish speakers, whether German citizens or not, were being conscripted into the German army reflects the ambiguous legal status of the Danes in Schleswig after the 1864 war. Article XIX of the 1864 Treaty of Vienna had granted inhabitants of the duchies six years to opt for Danish citizenship and transfer themselves, their families, and their personal property to Denmark, while keeping their landed property in the duchies. Furthermore, the article stipulated that "the right of an indigenous person, both in the kingdom of Denmark as in the Duchies, is preserved for all individuals who have it at the time of the exchange of the ratifications of this Treaty" (Oakes and Mowat 207–208). After Prussian and Austrian disagreements over the administration of the duchies resulted in the 1866 Prusso-Austrian war, Schleswig was ceded by Austria to Prussia on condition, as stipulated in Article V of the Peace of Prague, that the populations of northern Schleswig be granted the right to a plebiscite regarding remaining under Prussian rule or returning to the Danish kingdom. Approximately one-third of the population of Schleswig, some 50,000 Danes, returned to Denmark to await the plebiscite.

Jealous of its territorial gains, imperial Germany never granted the promised opportunity for self-determination and, in fact, formally renounced



this clause in the 1878 Treaty of Vienna subsequent to Germany's victory in the Franco-Prussian war. When those Danish-speakers who had initially left Schleswig accepted this disappointment and returned home, they found themselves in legal limbo, having lost their Danish citizenship by giving up their domicile in Denmark but still excluded from German citizenship for having failed to apply within the stipulated six-year time frame. Having no guaranteed civil rights, the stateless Danes in Schleswig were subjected to particularly harsh treatment, including arbitrary home searches, arrest, and expulsion. Cultural nationalism complicated the political situation, as the Danes in Schleswig tried to maintain their language and cultural traditions in the face of an increasingly strict German governmental policy of mandatory assimilation, particularly with regard to the use of Danish in schools and churches. When E.M. Köller became the prefect of Schleswig-Holstein in 1897, inaugurating what became known as the "Köller period," the official attacks on Danish culture, including the banning of all Danish songs, the use of the colors of the Danish flag, Danish-language literary lectures and theatrical performances, etc., escalated into what Brandes described as "a war of extermination" (Grössel 175).

Brandes's polemical essay *Das Dänentum in Südjütland*, published in Maximilian Harden's journal *Die Zukunft* in 1899, is a forceful exposé of Germany's brutal repression of Danish language and culture in Schleswig. Recognizing the irrational partisanship inspired by nationalist fervor, he admits how little a single individual can accomplish against an entire nation and cautions that "where nationalism is involved, people are deaf to anyone who pleads the cause of an oppressed neighboring people" (Brandes, "Dänentum" 51). Nevertheless, he expresses his hope of reaching at least those Germans not blinded by nationalism, arguing that the province, unlike the contested Franco-German region of Alsace, is completely Danish, "by history and tradition, as well as by the inclination of the heart" (53). Despite Denmark's diminutive size in terms of territory and population, he argues, the Danish language is a *Kultursprache*, giving voice to a distinct Danish culture. He acknowledges the debts that Danish literature, theology, and philosophy owe to Germany, but insists that Denmark has contributed equally to the enrichment of German culture, through such authors and artists as Holberg, Kierkegaard, Thorvaldsen, and Hans Christian Andersen. He highlights the respective strengths of the German and Danish cultures, but rejects the notion that Danish culture is a satellite of German, warning against the tendency to focus exclusively on the "incontestable, but yet quite distant kinship" between Germans and Danes and ignoring the deep differences that divide them (59).

Yet Brandes was careful not to provoke his German readers too severely, even when asserting Denmark's cultural independence. He simply calls into question the ethical and moral legitimacy of attempting to exterminate such a culture just because people who feel a sense of belonging to

it, through their heritage and language, prefer it to German: “Indeed, they do not disdain German culture and do not reject it, but Danish culture simply speaks to their instincts” (63). He denies the propaganda that attributes hostile attitudes toward Germany to the Danes, noting that the Danes in Schleswig had never demonstrated the slightest disobedience or desire to rebel against German rule, only to preserve their cultural inheritance.

At the same time, Brandes does not mince words in his description of the cautious attitude of the inhabitants of Schleswig and, in solidarity, Danes in general, toward Germans. He expresses amazement that the German authorities in Schleswig, who harassed and oppress their Danish subjects, are surprised that those same subjects did not love and admire Germany. Similarly, in response to complaints from German acquaintances that German tourists were not well liked in Denmark, he protests that Germans are treated with kindness and fairness, but marvels at those who believe that Germany’s violent conquest of two-fifths of Danish territory, annihilation of Denmark’s international political standing, forcible separation of families on both sides of the new border, and sadistically creative persecution of the entrapped Danes in Schleswig should have entitled them to affection and respect in Denmark. Nonetheless, the efforts of enlightened Danes had done much to improve public opinion of Germany in the decades since 1864, only to have their efforts sabotaged by the mistreatment of Danes in Schleswig.

The point of Brandes’s essay is neither to salve nor wound the feelings of his German readers, but to incite them to take control of the development of their own political culture and demand a change in governmental policy; in short, to embrace cosmopolitanism rather than militant nationalism in the name of patriotism and national pride. Brandes points out that while the Danes, having acquiesced in their inevitable military-political defeat, could not possibly be expected to surrender a thousand years of linguistic and cultural identity on command, German efforts to force such a surrender exposed Germany’s fears about its own identity, despite the might of its “armored fist” (66). In Brandes’s view, the frantic violence of Germany’s oppressive measures suggests that Germany did not truly believe that the attractive force of “German power, German wealth, German military fame, German science and art and the fifty-million-strong German population” could outmatch the influence of “the powerless miniature state that bears the name of Denmark” (67). Rather than enticing and rewarding Schleswig Danes for accepting German culture, which would have led to the gradual erasure of their Danish loyalties, he suggests, the German authorities’ decision to punish and persecute them instead for remaining loyal to Danish culture had the effect of strengthening the Danes’ resistance and exposing Germany’s deep-seated insecurities.

For Brandes, challenging German oppression of the Danes in Schleswig was not fundamentally an issue of competing national cultures or partisan politics, but rather a question of asserting essential, universal human rights.

The force that lent the Schleswig Danes the courage to resist German oppression, he argues, is the desire for self-determination, to think for themselves, to assert their equality with all other peoples. Honoring this universal human desire is what makes a country great, to Brandes's mind, not military might or territorial expanse. It is what he believes is worth fighting for, regardless of the historical importance, territorial expanse, military might, or linguistic uniqueness of a particular culture. When concern with the national outweighs such universal values, the effects can be devastating, not just for the victims of oppression, but also for the oppressors themselves. True greatness, which cannot be measured on an economic or military scale but only an ethical one, comes from the harmonization of national interests with universal human rights.

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