

Excerpts from Johann Gottfried von Herder's *Materials for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784)

“...Nature brings forth families; the most natural state therefore is also one people, with a national character of its own. For thousands of years this character preserves itself within the people and, if the native princes concern themselves with it, it can be cultivated in the most natural way: for a people is as much a plant of nature as is a family, except that it has more branches. Nothing therefore seems more contradictory to the true end of governments than the endless expansion of states, the wild confusion of races and nations under one scepter. An empire made up of a hundred peoples and a 120 provinces which have been forced together is a monstrosity, not a state-body.

...Active human powers are the springs of human history, and, as man originates from and in one race, so his body, education, and mode of thinking are genetic. Hence that striking national character, which, deeply imprinted on the most ancient peoples, is unequivocally displayed in all their operations on the earth. As the mineral water derives its component parts, its operative power, and its flavor from the soil through which it flows, so the ancient character of peoples arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments, that were peculiar to them. The manners of the fathers took deep root and became the internal prototype of the descendants. The mode of thinking of the Jews, which is best known to us from their writings and actions, may serve as an example: both in the land of their fathers and in the midst of other nations they remain as they were, and even when mixed with other peoples they may be distinguished for some generations onward. It was and is the same with all other peoples of antiquity---Egyptians, Chinese, Arabs, Hindus, etc. The more secluded they lived, nay frequently the more they were oppressed, the more their character was confirmed, so that, if every one of these nations had remained in its place, the earth might have been regarded as a garden where in one plot one human national plant, in another, another, bloomed in its proper form and nature, where in this corner one kind of national animal, in that, another, pursued its course according to its instincts and character....

Has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought-domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good.... As God tolerates all the different languages in the world, so also should a ruler not only tolerate but honor the various languages of his peoples.... The best culture of a people cannot be expressed through a foreign language; it thrives on the soil of a

nation most beautifully, and, I may say, it thrives only by means of the nation's inherited and inheritable dialect. With language is created the heart of a people; and is it not a high concern, amongst so many peoples---Hungarians, Slavs, Rumanians, etc.---to plant seeds of well-being for the far future and in the way that is dearest and most appropriate to them? . . .

No greater injury can be inflicted on a nation than to be robbed of her national character, the peculiarity of her spirit and her language. Reflect on this and you will perceive our irreparable loss. Look about you in Germany for the character of the nation, for their own particular cast of thought, for their own peculiar vein of speech; where are they? Read Tacitus; there you will find their character: "The tribes of Germany, who never degrade themselves by mingling with others, form a peculiar, unadulterated, original nation, which is its own archetype. Even their physical development is universally uniform, despite the large numbers of the people," and so forth. Now look about you and say: "The tribes of Germany have been degraded by mingling with others; they have sacrificed their natural disposition in protracted intellectual servitude; and, since they have, in contrast to others, imitated a tyrannical prototype for a long time, they are, among all the nations of Europe, the least true to themselves." . . .

If Germany were only guided by the forces of the age, by the leading strings of her own culture, our intellectual disposition would doubtless be poor and restricted; but it would be true to our own soil, fashioned upon its own model, and not so misshapen and cast down...."