

Georg Forster

Traveler, Revolutionary, World Citizen

Georg Forster was one of the great men of the eighteenth-century enlightenment. His part in James Cook's second voyage around the world made him one of the best-known writers and naturalists of his age. He was very much a political man: in Mainz, where he had been working since 1788, he became an ardent supporter of the French Revolution and one of the founders of the Republic of Mainz

Forster was born in Nassenhuben, near Danzig, in 1754, and he had an active life from the start. He became a legend in his own lifetime, although despised for having written against the Holy Roman Empire and regarded for a long time thereafter as a naive idealist. From 1772 to 1775, he traveled around the world with James Cook, looking for the fabled southern continent and exploring the islands of the Pacific. When he returned, he was celebrated by the greatest scientists of his time for his famous travel account *A Voyage Around the World* (1777). His fame brought him professorships in Kassel and Vilnius, and almost by accident brought him to Mainz, when he was called, in 1786, to supervise the local University library by Archbishop-Elector Friedrich Karl Josef von Erthal.

Up until then, Georg Forster had spent hard years under the strict parental guidance of his father Reinhold Forster, whose dedication to the natural sciences and whose unalleviated thirst for knowledge had influenced Georg even when he was a child. Georg Forster learnt the foundations of biology and botany when he was very young, and his father decided to take the talented ten-year-old boy on an expedition to Russia. Although it was a scientific success, the time spent in Russia brought financial ruin to the family. Deeply in debt, Reinhold Forster found himself forced to look out for new employers. Thus the Forsters ended up in England, which was then hiring scientists for its planned voyages to the South Seas. The talented young Forster created a stir among the learned societies in London. The young writer, barely thirteen years old, read to the Antiquarian Society of London from his translation of Lomonossow's *Short History of Russia*. Besides translating it, he wrote a sequel that continued Lomonossow's Russian history up to the present. After many setbacks, his father was ultimately appointed to participate in Cook's second voyage in 1772. His son was to accompany him as an aide and draftsman. When the British Admiralty declined to print Reinhold Forster's diaries of the voyage, the son wrote a comprehensive report in English on the voyage to Tahiti and the South Seas, which was soon thereafter translated into German. Georg Forster's report was highly lauded as a masterpiece of "philosophic" travel writing and brought the young man much attention throughout Europe.

Both the strenuous journey and the hard work of writing the book had finally paid off, for the sudden fame opened both father and son lucrative positions in Germany. Reinhold Forster received a professorship in Halle, and his son followed a call onto the chair of natural history at the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel. Georg Forster, however, was soon annoyed by the absolutist court of the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel and cheerfully accepted a professorship at the newly-founded University of Vilnius in Poland. This assignment turned out to be a great disappointment. When the Czar's offer of leading an expedition into the unknown areas of the Pacific Ocean came to naught, an offer by the Archbishop-Elector of Mainz to head the University library and to teach natural history seemed a ray of hope for the young scientist and his growing family. But soon, he became disillusioned. As a Protestant in a Catholic city, he was not well-liked by all the citizens of Mainz. Furthermore, the books that were now in his care were spread all over the city. The university library also consisted mostly of spiritual books or old religious tracts well-ravaged by the dust of an

unbroken Catholic past. More than half of the fifty thousand books were doubles. It was a frustrating situation for a promising young scientist and enlightenment thinker. Nevertheless, Georg Forster started cataloguing them and took great care to provide a single library building for the wide-spread collection of books.

The confined intellectual climate and growing parochialism of the Catholic archdiocese became increasingly difficult for him to cope with. A trip taken in spring of 1790 together with the young Alexander von Humboldt, to Brabant, Flanders, Holland, England, and France, was supposed to alleviate a deep psychological crisis. His *Ansichten vom Niederrhein*, published a year later, has been called a classic of German prose by Friedrich Schlegel. The aesthetic and political analyses in the letters expand a conventional travel narrative into a skillful essay of cultural history and social criticism. The uprisings in Aix-la-Chapelle, Liege, in Belgium and Holland, which were overshadowed by the galloping events of the French Revolution, first confronted Georg Forster with the “antinomies of politics,” as he calls it in his book. He was a man of the enlightenment and a liberal, and so for the first time saw himself forced to think about the problems of the Revolution and the demands of democracy. Even though he judged with moderation, he realized the necessity to change existing social conditions. When the French revolutionary troops took Mainz in 1792 and Mainz citizens adopted a republican constitution, Georg Forster was drawn into the maelstrom of political events. In his *Darstellung der Revolution in Mainz* (1793), he derided the cowardice of the higher classes and prophesied the “end of despotism.” He joined the Jacobin club and made his Mainz “brothers” take note:

Every authority that is not founded on reason, not on the free will of all, every authority of which it is said that it cannot be taken back and be destroyed, is unjust, usurpist, tyrannical, and must not be tolerated by free men.

When he went as a delegate of the Mainz convent to Paris in 1793, he nevertheless had to see that “truth, reason, freedom, and equality,” for which he had spoken at the Mainz Jacobin club, were not in high currency. The Jacobin regime incessantly swallowed its children, and instead of worshipping the tree of liberty, the masses cheered the guillotine. But Forster did not abandon the revolution. To his doubting friends in Germany, he said: “No, our cause will win, and where it doesn’t, it is beautiful to die with it.” After Prussian troops recaptured Mainz, the imperial ban was pronounced on Georg Forster. In January 1794, he died, aged 39, in Paris, of pneumonia. Just three years later, at the Peace of Campo Formio, Mainz became French again.

His uncompromising stance and his unsparing analysis of despotism, which he suggested demanded “automata,” and his stinging criticism of “priests and levites” and their “ridiculous mummeries and babbled formulas” suggest parallels to the life of Thomas Paine (1737-1809). Forster’s *Über die Beziehung der Staatskunst auf das Glück der Menschheit* (1793) shows similarities to Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791) and his last great work *The Age of Reason* (1794). Both were men of the enlightenment and radical thinkers who believed in the laws of nature to whom the universe obeyed. Furthermore, both demanded a rational man, less formed by divine providence than by education and his social surroundings. Both were despised as revolutionaries, atheists and blasphemers. Due to the nationalist developments of the nineteenth century, their former fame was increasingly forgotten. While the former GDR considered him a hero of the revolution and launched a seminal edition of his works, Georg Forster vanished from the public discourse in the Federal Republic, only to be rediscovered recently. In the face of an apparently limitless economic globalization, Forster’s appeal to posterity that there could be “no force that binds free men to be another’s servant,” and his belief in the world and mankind’s happiness seem more necessary than ever.