

GEORG FORSTER IN PARIS (1793/94)¹

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Georg (also known as George or Georges) Forster was 12 when his first book came out, a translation into English of Lomonosov's Chronological Abridgement of the Russian History (1760), "continued to the present Time by the Translator." He was 17 when, together with his father Johann Reinhold Forster, he translated de Bougainville's Voyage autour du monde into English (1771). He was 18 when he accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage to the South Seas, 22 when he published the most remarkable account of that voyage of exploration, A Voyage Round the World (1777). Forster – whose works, according to Friedrich Schlegel, "breathe the spirit of free progression" like nobody else's – was not only one of the finest

¹ My main sources are the standard edition of Georg Forster's complete works, the so-called *Akademie-Ausgabe*: Georg Forster, *Georg Forsters Werke: Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe*, 18 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958-2003) [subsequently AA], especially vol. 15, which has all his letters from Paris, plus what is, in my regard, the finest biography of Georg Forster to date, Ludwig Uhlig, *Georg Forster: Lebensabenteuer eines gelehrten Weltbürgers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004). Since these are in German, all translations into English are my own; references, however, are to the original German works. I have published variously on Georg Forster, most extensively in *Fremd-Erfahrungen: Diskursive Konstruktion von Identität in der britischen Romantik, II: Identität auf Reisen* (Trier: WVT, 2009) 67-123, which focuses on *A Voyage Round the World*. My most substantial English-language publications on aspects of Forster's work are "Exploded Convictions, Perished Certainties: The Transformational Experience of the South Seas in Georg Forster's *A Voyage Round the World*," *Romantic Localities: Europe Writes Place*, ed. Christoph Bode and Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010) 221-36, 278-79, and "Georg(e) Forster and the Epistemology of a Viewpoint in Motion: A Composition in Five Movements," *Romanticism and Knowledge: Selected Papers from the Munich Joint Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism and the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism*, ed. Stefanie Fricke, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard and Katharina Pink (Trier: WVT, 2015) 97-114.

scientists and ethnographers of the age, whose concept of a holistic geography, integrating natural and social sciences, would deeply influence his most prominent student, Alexander von Humboldt, he was also a polyglot cosmopolitan of hybrid and fluid national and cultural identities – and a supporter of the French Revolution. In 1793, he travelled to Paris to ask for the admittance of the short-lived Republic of Mainz to the French Republic, only to die under miserable circumstances a few months later, not yet 40. This essay focuses on his final months (he died in Paris on 10 January 1794) and on his acquaintances there (Théroigne de Méricourt and Bernardin de St. Pierre, for instance), including his relations with other expatriates, German or English (e.g., Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft). Forster is presented here as an intellectual with no affiliations or loyalties to any linguistic, ethnic or national community – a citizen of the world, obliged only to live a life in which he proves to be “worthy of himself.”

Forster's Life, Abridged

Georg Forster was born on 27 November 1754 in Nassenhuben (then in Poland, later in Prussia, now in Poland again). His father was Johann Reinhold Forster, vicar and polymath. The Forsters were partly of English-Scottish descent. Forster senior hated it when his surname was misspelt “Förster,” and although his son was christened “Georg,” Forster junior had no objections when, living in England and travelling with Cook, “Georg” was naturalized as “George.” Nor did he object when, later in France, he was, of course, referred to as “Georges” Forster. To him, it did not really matter.

In 1765-66, Johann Reinhold Forster takes his son with him on a scientific excursion to Russia. It is in St. Petersburg that Georg enjoys, briefly, the only formal schooling he ever had. But his father had systematically tutored him in Botany, Zoology, Geology, Geography and History, as well as in English, French, Russian, Latin and Mathematics. When they appear in London, in 1766, Georg is only eleven years old. And a child prodigy. Before long, he is the talk of the town. His father becomes an instructor at the Dissenting Academy in Warrington (his predecessor there was none other than Joseph Priestley, and his successor was Jean-Paul Marat), at which point Georg embarks on an English translation of Mikhail Lomonosov's *A Chronological Abridgement of the Russian History*, then, together with his father, of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde*, with its seminal description of Tahiti as *La nouvelle Cythère*, the New Island of Love. Finishing the latter in 1771, he is 16. In 1772 his father, supported by Joseph Banks, becomes a member of the Royal Academy, later also of the Society of Antiquarians of London and of the Royal Society of Arts. Georg accompanies his father wherever he goes. At very short notice, Johann Reinhold

Forster is then asked to replace Banks as chief scientist on Cook's second voyage (1772-75), whose main objective it is to find out whether (and where) there is "the great southern continent" postulated by so many armchair geographers. Forster senior insists on being accompanied by his son Georg, and his request is granted. When the *Resolution* sets sail, Georg is only 17. When they return, he will produce *the* classic account of Cook's second voyage – not only a hallmark of eighteenth-century travel writing, but a benchmark in the history of accounts of scientific voyages of discovery: *A Voyage Round the World*, published in two volumes in 1777 (the German translation, prepared by the Forsters with the help of Rudolf Erich Raspe, comes out in 1778-80).

What came after *A Voyage Round the World*? Georg Forster returns to Europe in 1778, is lionized in Paris (where he meets with the Conte de Buffon and Benjamin Franklin), becomes a professor, first in Kassel (1778), then at the (then Polish) university of Vilnius in 1784. The following year he marries the daughter of a Göttingen professor, Therese Heyne, before he eventually accepts, in 1788, the position of Head Librarian of the university library in Mainz. His first visitor in Mainz is Wilhelm von Humboldt, later the reformer of the Prussian university system (copied by America's Ivy League universities), followed by his younger brother, Alexander, then a student at Göttingen. In the spring of 1790, Georg Forster (aged 35) and Alexander von Humboldt (aged 20) – who would later claim that nobody exerted a stronger influence upon his scientific thinking than Forster – set out to travel down the Rhine to the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium) and the (Republic of the United) Netherlands. From Dunkirk they travel to Ostend, Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp, then to The Hague, Amsterdam and Leiden, finally on to England and back to France. The whole trip is wonderfully captured in Forster's *Ansichten vom Niederrhein* (1791). In London, they meet (again, for Georg) Sir Joseph Banks, who occupies a central position in the organization of contemporary science in Britain.² In Paris, the young and eager student and his much-travelled mentor help with the preparations for the first anniversary of the French Revolution (Humboldt carries sand in a wheelbarrow for the elevation of the Temple of Freedom), but they do not stay on for the festivities: they are back in Mainz on 11 July 1790. Had they left England two weeks later instead of at the end of June, they might have been on the same boat as a young student from Cambridge, William Wordsworth, who arrived in

² Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: HarperPress, 2009) 1-59.

Calais, from Dover, on 13 July 1790: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!”³

Other visitors in Mainz include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who passes through, late in August 1792, on his journey to cover the battle of Valmy (of which he famously remarked, “From here and today issues a new period of the history of mankind!”). Forster becomes actively involved in the short-lived Mainz republic and, unlike Goethe, he is a supporter of the French Revolution. He eventually travels to Paris in 1793, where he is detained by circumstances – never to return. His marriage had disintegrated long before, Therese betraying him openly with a friend of his, even when they were still living together in Germany. From Paris and again during a final encounter on the French-Swiss border, Georg – all understanding, passive, and enlightened – asks for a *ménage à trois*, but to no avail. Therese leaves him forever, with their two children. Georg Forster dies miserably on 10 January 1794, only 39 years old, in abject poverty.

Why and how exactly did Forster end up in revolutionary Paris? What made him an exile and an expatriate? What made him go to France at a time when so many were fleeing in the opposite direction? What made him an immigrant, as opposed to all those émigrés, who later on would gain so much more attention, empathy, and pity?

Why Did Forster Go to Paris in 1793?

The German response to the French Revolution varied, and the German and German-speaking provinces on the left and right banks of the river Rhine were no exception: for example, whereas Strassburg and the German-speaking province of Alsace were in favour of the revolution and attracted supporters like Cotta, Schneider, and Dorsch, Koblenz and other cities in the *Mittelrhein* area were hotbeds of reactionaries, since the brothers of Louis XVI and émigré nobility had withdrawn to that region. Forster’s own stance changed over time. Initially neither for the Jacobins nor for the Girondistes, he writes to Heyne on 5 June 1792 that he is “allemaal lieber für als wider die Jakobiner” – “in any case rather for than against the Jacobins.” The Germans in general – “our rough, poor, and uneducated people” – he believes to be unfit and “unreif” (too immature) for a revolution anyway.⁴ In his *Erinnerungen aus dem Jahre 1790* (Reminiscences of the Year 1790) he quotes Lessing (although Forster places these words in the

³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 1805, XI, 692-93.

⁴ Cf. Uhlig 289, 309.

mouth of Benjamin Franklin) to the effect that “Whatever costs blood, is not worth blood,” but when this is published in September 1792, the victory at Valmy and the September massacres of 1792 have shifted the emphasis – as in many other pro-revolutionary publications both inside and outside France – from the question “Violence: yes or no?” to “What are the true causes of revolutionary violence?” As Forster sees it, violence, in an international context, is due to outside interference – the reactionary forces of Europe will not allow the French nation any self-determination. Domestically, however, it is caused by the ignorance and immaturity of the people, which, in turn, is due to their oppression under the *ancien régime*. There is no point, argues Forster, in waiting until they have become less ignorant and more mature. For this will never happen as long as the current circumstances prevail. So, even before the French arrive in Mainz, Forster entertains the idea that under some circumstances force can be necessary – *for progressive ends*; and that since the reactionaries evidently have no qualms about using force, it is justifiable not only to use force in defence of the revolution but also to sanction their use by others who yet lack the political consciousness to bring about revolution of their own making. This is only implied in the *Erinnerungen*, though he seems not entirely at ease with this idea.

On October 21, 1792, the French forces occupy Mainz without any military action – there is no resistance whatsoever and the *Kurfürst* (Elector, electoral prince) of Mainz has fled. The French army, unopposed, marches on to Frankfurt. On 23 October, *le général* Adam-Philippe de Custine (“général moustache”) offers Mainz freedom of choice: if it does not accept the freedom the French bring, then its future sovereign will be determined by a future peace treaty. Forster, now a member of the local *Jakobinerklub* (Jacobins’ Club), which is in favour of democracy and a republic, is at first hesitant, especially about the incorporation of the city into the French Republic, but then decides to play an active role (“to live and die a Republican!”) and promotes what he, meanwhile, has come to see as a political necessity: the incorporation of the entire left-bank German provinces into France: it seems to him to be the only way to preserve the freedom that has been brought to the backward Germans by the French. Disregarding notions like nation, state, and ethnicity, Forster is now objectively a secessionist. Since for him the real dividing line is not between nations and states anyway, but between progressive and regressive forces, and between enlightenment and obscurantism, it makes perfect sense to opt for the progressive, democratic, revolutionary camp – which happens to be French. On 4 November 1792, General Custine writes to the national convention in Paris: “I have won Forster

for the Revolution!”⁵ Georg Forster is not the leader of this German revolution that establishes the short-lived Republic of Mainz, but, articulate and polyglot as he is, he is its main spokesperson and propagandist – both in German and in French. In that function, he creates a working relationship with Custine – he is the French general’s main contact person and, by virtue of that, one of the most important negotiators on the German side.

Meanwhile back in Berlin, Ewald Graf Hertzberg intercedes for Forster to become a member of the *Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Based on his merits, that should not have been a problem: Forster is a natural scientist of international renown, an ethnologist with immense knowledge and practical experience, a linguist of the highest calibre, and, in addition, a German public intellectual. But when the authorities in Berlin hear what Forster has been doing in Mainz, his prospects for advancement come to an end. Instead of being appointed to the *Preußische Akademie*, he is, in December 1792, condemned for High Treason to *Reichsacht*, or *Mandatum avocatorium* – outlawry in the German Emperor’s name. Georg Forster’s wry comment is: “I’m not Prussian anyway.”

On the French side, policy with regard to territorial gains had also changed over time: as early as 3 September 1791 the *Constituante* national assembly had outlawed annexations and written this into the constitution. However, if territories *asked* to be admitted (as had Savoy), that was a different matter, for that was not annexation, but *reunion*. Robespierre, of all people, had sarcastically warned against this Girondist idea: nobody loved armed missionaries. And French speculation about incorporating all of Germany left of the Rhine to create a *Département du bouche de Main* showed that *réunion* was a concept that could be inflated almost at will: these territories had never been French in all their history. Since November 1792 with the formal revocation of the offer of liberation, there had been mounting evidence that this was no longer a war of liberation, but one of annexation: whoever did not accept the offer of freedom was treated as an enemy by the French. That was what General Custine’s offer of freedom of choice amounted to. When on 21 January 1793, Louis XVI is executed in Paris, Georg Forster endorses the majority vote. Five days later, General Custine declares the *état de siège* for Mainz. Forster protests with him and bitterly accuses the French of exploiting and oppressing the Germans, who are in turn deeply disappointed: they had not been told that the French came as friends, but only to now take everything away. It is not clear whether this protest note ever reached Custine. If so, there was no response; except that the French continued their confiscations.

⁵ Cf. Uhlig 304.

In spite of this, Forster continues his agitation for inclusion in the French Republic and on 21 March 1793, ninety delegates from various German cities (all left-bank) sign a petition that asks for inclusion of their territories (for instance the territories of Mainz, Landau and Bingen, standing for a *linksrheinische deutsche Republik*) into the French Republic. Four days later, Forster leaves Germany to take this petition to Paris, with two other delegates, Andreas Patocki, a merchant from Mainz, and Adam Lux, a landowner from Kostheim. Forster was never to return to Germany.

Mainz falls on 22 July 1793. Forster loses his personal library and archive. The German Jacobins and their fellow-travellers are treated cruelly by their fellow citizens, thereby proving Forster right: they did not deserve the freedom that was brought to them. In any case, they did not want it. After the fall of Mainz, General Custine, once Forster's opposite number (but with all the power on his side), is dismissed from the French army, charged and, after a trial that drew much public attention, eventually executed on 28 August 1793. Forster cannot have missed the news, although he was in the north of France when this happened.

Forster in Paris: Contacts and Reading

On 30 March 1793 the French convention accepts, by acclamation, the admission of the *Rheinisch-Deutsche Republik* to the French Republic. In turn, Forster and his two fellow delegates become members of the French convention. At the time, he is living in the *Maison des patriotes Hollandais*, Rue des Moulins, near the Palais Royal and the Tuileries and the present location of the *Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art*.

Apart from his fellow delegates, what are his contacts in revolutionary Paris? On account of his letters, we know that he meets Helen Maria Williams and her mother, whom he met in April (letters of 13 and 16 April), as well as Mary Wollstonecraft on 5 April. Wollstonecraft, observes Forster, is "a courteous and charming woman" ("ein sehr artiges Weib"), "there is much liveness ["viel Liantes"] in her, more than English women usually have." Of Gilbert Imlay he makes no mention. His most frequent encounters are with the Scottish radical Thomas Christie, author of *Letters on the Revolution in France, and on the New Constitution* (1791), and his wife and sister-in-law, whom he sees almost on a daily basis, according to his letter of 23 June. He also meets Thomas Paine, of whom he writes: "I found not much remarkable in him. Better enjoy him in his writings. What is eccentric and egotistical in some Englishmen, he has to the highest degree.

His face is scarlet and full of purple spots, which make him ugly; apart from that, he has a spiritual physiognomy and a fiery eye"⁶ (letter of 17 May 1793).

In Paris, Forster seems also to have spent much of his time in the company of other German expatriates, although his correspondence may here be biased. Since the majority of his letters are sent to Germany, Forster would, of course, primarily mention encounters and acquaintances with whose names the addressees could be familiar. His contacts include Graf Gustav von Schlabrendorf ("der einzige Mensch, den ich hier liebgewinne" – "the only person to whom I can take here" – 1 June 1793);⁷ Friedrich Freiherr von der Trenck, the Prussian officer, writer and adventurer (whom he unreservedly dislikes because of his egotism, bragging and vanity), who would eventually be executed in Paris on 24 July 1795; Franz Michael Leuchsenring, the sentimental writer with Jacobin leanings, previously an acquaintance of Jacobi's, Herder's, Goethe's and Moses Mendelssohn's; Konrad Engelbert Oelsner, a journalist with Girondin sympathies, at the centre of a network of writers and politicians, on whose reports from revolutionary Paris the Germans largely relied; and finally Johann Georg Kerner, a physician, journalist, and critical chronicler of the Revolution. Among this whole group of German expatriates, Forster would have stood out for at least two reasons: he was the only true celebrity of international renown, and he was a member of parliament of the French Republic.

Among the French contacts he mentions (curiously enough, he does not record the many encounters he must have had in his function as delegate of the National Convention), the most noteworthy, to him, is Théroigne de Méricourt, "the amazon of the French Revolution," whom he meets in July (letter of 23 July 1793):

Imagine a 25 or 28 year old tanned girl with the most open face, with features that were beautiful once, and partially still are and which betray a simple, noble, firm character full of spirit and enthusiasm; particularly much that bespeaks of gentle tenderness around her eyes and mouth. Her whole being is dissolved in a spirit of liberty [Freiheitssinn], all she ever speaks of is the revolution. And mark you well: all the assessments she made yesterday turned out to be hitting the mark, without any exception, definite and straight they hit the point. [...] She comes from Luxemburg [she was actually born in Liège] and she is most eagerly engaged for her fatherland's and Germany's freedom. She speaks only French, fluently

⁶ Cf. Thomas Manning's comments on Paine in Paris, cited in Edward Weech's essay in the present issue.

⁷ For Schlabrendorf's perspective, see Philip Hunnekuhl's essay in the present issue.

and energetically, if not quite correctly – although, who speaks correctly these days?

(AA 15: 400)

Forster in love? His warm description may suggest it. What is remarkable in any case is that Forster met Théroigne two months after she, on 15 May 1793, had been physically attacked and badly hurt by enraged *sans-culottes* who hated their former idol for having crossed over from the Jacobin to the Girondin camp. She only just survived the attack in spite of heavy head injuries (which Forster does not mention). A year later, her brother would have her declared insane on account of the consequences of her earlier maltreatment and had her committed to an asylum, where she died twenty-three years later.

Other French contacts mentioned by Forster include Nicolas Chamfort, Head Librarian of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, formerly a successful dramatist (possibly a ghostwriter for Joseph Sieyès and Mirabeau) and purportedly also coiner of the phrase (later taken over by Georg Büchner) “guerre aux châteaux, paix aux chaumières” (“war to the palace, peace to the cottage”). Bernardin de St. Pierre, famous author of *Paul et Virginie* (1788), one of the key texts of Romanticism *avant la lettre* in France, whom Forster describes as “honest,” and finally, Eugène Onfroy, “the bookseller,” and Laurent le Coulteux [sic, rather than Couteulx], “the banker.”

As these names indicate, Forster, the cosmopolitan traveller and universally acknowledged scientist, the revolutionary go-between and free spirit, enjoyed far more enlightened and stimulating company and conversation in Paris than formerly in Mainz. Yet, his idea had not been to stay in Paris indefinitely. He remained only because, after the fall of Mainz in July, return became impossible, at least for the time being; and by the time the situation changed, he was no longer alive.

If the list of Forster’s personal contacts in Paris shows him at the centre of the political and intellectual scene, his reading matter for the summer months of 1793 is no less impressive. In a letter from July (AA 15: 441), he gives an overview of what he has read recently: Arthur Young’s *Travels in France and Italy*,⁸ Favier’s *Politique de tous les Cabinets de l’Europe sous Louis XV. et Louis XVI.* [throughout, I follow Forster’s spelling], *Nouveau Siècle de Louis XVI.* (according to him, a kind of anthology of poems), Tacitus, Quintilian, Strada, Ariost, Mably, Phocion, *History of the Filibusters*, Mirabeau’s *Correspondance secrète de Berlin*, Destouches (“however, too dull and uniform”), Milton’s smaller poems, Arthur Lee’s

⁸ Cf. Bode, *Fremd-Erfahrungen* 125-64.

“bombastic tragedies,” and Abbé Vertot’s “entirely dreadful” *Révolutions Romaines* in three volumes.

But what engages him most in the summer of 1793 is a book that is given to him by the National Convention: the first edition of William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (which he, dashing off his lines, calls *Enquiry on Political Justice*). This copy had been sent by its author to the French National Convention as a present – no other copies were available in Paris at the time – and whoever it was in the French national assembly who received it thought it best to pass it on to Forster, the German Englishman, now member of parliament. And Forster was absolutely delighted with the gift and with what he found in Godwin’s book:

A very thorough philosophical work, in which, at long last, the whole theory of human society and its forms of government are [sic] set upon reason and morals and their irrefutable principles. A work full of true and sacred profession of the truth, which will at least have effect in the future, even if it should not have its effect today. I make excerpts from it as much as I can, for the book belongs to the *National Convention*, to which the author gave it as a present.

(AA 15: 400)

Incidentally, these comments occur in the same letter in which Forster enthuses about Théroigne de Méricourt. It is hard to say who made the deeper impression on him, Théroigne or Godwin, but the letter suggests that his reading experiences in Paris could be as intense as his personal encounters.

Since exiles, émigrés and expatriates is the topic of this issue, it might be of interest that in the autumn 1793 Forster read the *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés* by Isabelle de Charrière. His reaction in this case was more ambivalent, as he records on 11 November 1793:

The emigrant letters of Frau von Charriere I have read with delight. [...] Still, I don't know what she aims to achieve with these, because the, strictly speaking, political matter in them is too unimportant to be their main purpose, and the plot is only sketched, but not realized, which means that as a novel it also amounts to nothing. Finally, characterization, of which, true, there is some, isn't the main purpose either. Well, I suppose she wanted a bit of everything, and therefore as a whole it is nothing.

Ironically, Isabelle de Charrière's novels would later mostly be translated into German by Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, Forster's betraying friend, and by his wife Therese Huber, formerly Therese Forster, the recipient of this letter. Though firm evidence is lacking, it could be that it was Forster who initially pointed Therese to Isabelle de Charrière – though it is also clear from the letter he did not really deem her worthy of translation.

“No Other Obligation but (...) to Be Worthy of Ourselves”: Forster's Changing View of the Revolution

Practically all of Forster's extant letters from Paris are addressed to his wife, Therese, who, with their two children, was now living openly together with his friend Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, with whom she had had a long-standing love affair. She was to marry Huber shortly after Forster's death. Forster made a last effort to make up with her during a final encounter in early November 1793, when he travelled to the French-Swiss border and crossed over, under great personal danger, to spend four days together with Therese, the children and Huber. They were never to see each other again.⁹

The following quotes from Forster's letters between the end of March and mid-July 1793 give, I hope, a good survey of his changing attitude to and his growing disillusion with the French Revolution, now that he lived right at the centre of it:

I'm still quite satisfied with the revolution, although it is altogether different from what most people think it is. (31 March 1793)

Still I maintain that one should not regard the revolution with respect to the happiness or unhappiness of mankind, but as one of the great means of destiny to bring about changes in humanity. (4 April 1793)

That would be all I needed: to come to the conclusion that I had given my last strength for an absurdity, to have worked with honest zeal for a cause,

⁹ One of the last movies produced in the German Democratic Republic, in 1989, is about this final meeting of the five: *Treffen in Travers*. It is, in more than one respect, a movie about the failure of revolutionary hopes, betrayals and loyalties, idealism and practical realism. It is, in a way, equally about Georg Forster and about the imminent collapse of a regime (that of 1989) that, while claiming to work in the interest of the majority, knew all too well it never had this majority behind them.

never really meant seriously by anyone else, but which is just a cloak for the basest passions! (13 April 1793)

Ever since I know there is no virtue in this revolution, it just disgusts me. (16 April 1793)

The tyranny of reason [...] is yet to come for humanity. (16 April 1793)

I am of the opinion that this society of Jacobins here is entirely corrupted by its disgraceful leaders. (16 May 1793)

Everywhere behind the splendid oratory you see sheer egotism lurking [...]. A disgrace for the revolution are the blood tribunals. I don't want to even think of them. (23 June 1793)

Never was there tyranny with so much shamelessness, so much wild boisterousness, never were all principles trampled upon in such a way, never reigned calumny with such unrestrained force. This period must be overcome and the nation will overcome it, but maybe the struggle is even harder than one imagines. [...] Stop believing in a kind of politics that is based upon the commonweal, the true interest – it exists nowhere. (26 June 1793)

I know full well that perfect happiness, perfect virtue and perfect freedom cannot be expected in this world and that they are [rather] the result of our own striving to become masters of ourselves [than] the effect of this or that form of government. However, I also know that the great mass of mankind needs a free form of government to achieve a certain degree of virtue, to enjoy a certain degree of happiness. (Possibly to Thomas Brand, 11 July 1793. The grammar of the second part of the first sentence is faulty, hence the emendations.)

Given his proximity to the revolutionary scene, it is not surprising that the events of the summer of 1793 should have a more or less direct impact on Forster. On 24 June, the new French Constitution was passed and it was Forster who was officially asked to translate it into English and German. He mentions that he has finished these translations on 8 July. On 13 July, Jean Paul Marat is assassinated by Charlotte Corday. Forster is deeply impressed by her calmness and her bearing:

The fanatical conviction of Marat's murderess is irrelevant here, it may have its foundation in error or in truth, but what matters is the purity of her soul, which was so entirely filled by her purpose and accepted with such beautiful heroic strength all consequences of her deed. (19 July 1793)

Adam Lux, Forster's fellow delegate from Mainz, is no less impressed by Charlotte Corday. He writes a pamphlet defending her, is arrested because of it and eventually executed on 4 November 1793. Forster learns of this on 10 November: "But the unfortunate Lux has become, according to his wishes, a martyr for liberty on the guillotine. This piece of news has spoilt my whole day."

After the fall of Mainz on 22 July, Forster, separated from his wife and children, deprived of his library and collections, was caught in Paris and became increasingly desperate. On 21 August, he writes to Therese that he sees his political career at an end because, being what and who he is, he sees no chance that the whole direction in which the "state machine" is going to change in the foreseeable future – so how can he serve such a state?

Had I known some 10 or 8 months ago what I know now, beyond any doubt I would have gone to Hamburg or Altona and not joined the Jacobins' Club [in Mainz]. I am fully aware of the import of what I am saying here. It is simply impossible that a human being of my thinking, my convictions, my character can remain in public office and serve this state.

Still (he writes this from Arras), from August he is in the north of France (mainly in Cambrai), sent there by the French Republic to negotiate with the English troops – negotiations that never come to anything. Was he trying to serve peace, at least?

From September 1793 till July 1794, the Terror reigns in Paris. Forster sees many go to the guillotine. He is appalled and responds with what we can regard as his final political and ethical credo: "Eine andere Verbindlichkeit als diese, die wir gegen uns selbst haben, *unserer selbst werth zu sein*, giebt es nicht; dies ist die einzige Grundlage aller wahren Moralität des Menschen" ("There is no other obligation but the one we owe ourselves, [viz.] to be worthy of ourselves; that is the only principle of all true morality in man." 25 September 1793). (An echo from the future: "The calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself."¹⁰)

¹⁰ Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) I, 360-61.

If that is his ultimate credo, then a letter of 11 November 1793 can be read as his philosophical testament. Here is its key passage, which reverberates strongly with his thirst for knowledge and his enthusiasm for things unknown that he had already displayed so conspicuously, sailing with Captain Cook in the South Seas, as a teenager:

Basically, the only thing that really counts is what you posit as the purpose of [your] life. More and more I convince myself that *action* [Wirken] is only the smallest part of it, the main point is perceiving and taking in [Wahrnehmen und Aufnehmen] or, in other words, intellectual delight, in that we bring the world, which is outside us, into ourselves by way of experience, association of ideas, and abstraction. The essential effect we have on others is always only the joy we can have with one other, therefore in the circles of our families and friends. True, actions on a greater scale must find their place, however, in their consequences and in their yield of delight they are far more unfortunate.

Ironically, Forster writes this to Huber, after their inconclusive last encounter in Travers. After that, it was clear there would be no more family circle for Forster and the circle of his friends in Paris was also dwindling fast.

In November/December 1793, Forster catches a bad cold, which is followed by extreme rheumatism, pneumonia, and an inflammation of the chest; totally emaciated, he dies on 10 January 1794, of a stroke.

Aftermath

The signature of Georg Forster's writing and thinking is beautifully captured in Friedrich Schlegel's congenial essay on him:

Under all proper prose writers who can lay a claim to a position on the list of German classical authors, no one breathes the spirit of free progression as much as Georg Forster. You almost never put aside one of his writings without feeling, not only revived and enriched, but enlarged to thinking for yourself, thinking independently. [...] Each pulse of his ever-active character yearns to progress. Among all different aspects of his rich and versatile mind, perfectibility [Vervollkommnung] remains the solid principal idea all through his career as a writer; in spite of which he did not hold that every wish of humankind could be realized immediately.¹¹

¹¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Schriften zur Literatur* (Munich: DTV, 1985) 195-96.

Forster's scientific legacy was passed on to Alexander von Humboldt, who never tired of telling himself and others how much he owed to his "friend and teacher" Forster¹² – namely, his entire holistic approach to nature and society.¹³ Politically, he was held in higher esteem in East than in West Germany: it is no mere coincidence that the massive project of editing his *Werke* was begun in the GDR, not the Federal Republic, although it is a final irony of history that by the time it was finished, the GDR had ceased to exist and its territory was now only part of a greater, unified Germany, in which the project was completed.

As for Mainz, unharmed by the French invasion of 1792, it was heavily damaged by the Prussian siege and 'liberation' of 1793. In 1797, the Austrians, without any battle, handed it back to the French, together with all their left-bank possessions. The French did not leave until 1814, after the fall of Napoleon, only to return in 1919 and in 1945. Arguably, to Georg Forster – an intellectual with no affiliations or loyalties to any ethnic, linguistic, let alone 'national' community – these territorial exchanges and hand-overs would not have mattered much since he was not thinking in *these* categories anyway. What mattered to him were intellectual and political dividing lines, ever fluid, ever changing, that refuse to be represented on a geographical-political map, simply because they can be found *within* any given society as part of its contradictory set-up.

When so many tried to escape revolutionary Paris and France in early 1793, Forster travelled in the opposite direction, holding on, unto the last, to the only obligation he could ever acknowledge: to be worthy of himself. It seems that in this, too – as so often in his life – he was going against the tide.

¹² Cf. Uhlig 346.

¹³ Cf. Schlegel 214: "Finally, the reunification of all essentially connected, though now separated and dismembered *Wissenschaften* into one single, indivisible whole he deems the most sublime objective of the scientist." The Forster-Humboldt relationship is explored in Bode, "Georg(e) Forster and the Epistemology of a Viewpoint in Motion."