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The Edict on Religion of 1788 and the  
Statistics of Public Discussion in Prussia

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## Abstract

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*Most works on the eighteenth century see the public sphere as an emancipatory, anti-state phenomenon. This essay offers a statistical analysis of a broad German debate that occurred in the wake of Prussia's Edict on Religion to show that, in fact, the reverse was probably true. Between 1788, the year the edict was published, and 1800, the year the last text on the subject appeared, German writers published over 120 works on the matter. Contrary to what one would expect, based on the existing literature, supporters of the edict published over 55% of the total works published. This essay does not consider which arguments were the better, but it does hold that the German public sphere was a much more elitist enterprise than has, heretofore, been argued. More importantly, it anchors this support for the kind of social control that the edict represented in a conservative print culture that produced and maintained an intellectual elite.*

## Resumen

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*La mayoría de los estudios del siglo dieciocho ven a la esfera pública como un fenómeno emancipatorio y anti-estatista. Este ensayo ofrece un análisis estadístico acerca de un amplio debate Alemán que ocurrió al despertar del Edicto de Prusia de la Religión, para mostrar que, de hecho, lo contrario fue probablemente cierto. Entre 1788, el año que el edicto fue publicado, y 1800, año en el cual el último texto que trataba del tema apareció, los escritores Alemanes publicaron más de 120 trabajos en la materia. Contrario a lo que uno podría esperar, basado en la literatura existente, 55% del total de las obras fueron publicadas por los que apoyaban el edicto. Este ensayo no considera qué argumentos eran los mejores, pero sí sostiene que la esfera pública Alemana era una empresa mucho más elitista de lo que hasta ahora se ha argumentado. Más importante aún, ancla este soporte para el tipo de control social que el edicto representaba en una cultura de imprenta conservadora que producía y mantenía una élite intelectual.*



## *Introduction*

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When Johann Christoph Woellner promulgated the Edict on Religion in 1788, he sparked a broad debate that covered every aspect of the new law. The discussion in books, pamphlets, and journal articles reached across much of northern Germany, from Danish-controlled Schleswig over to Hanover and Braunschweig, across to Prussia, and down into Saxony and Thuringia. From Frankfurt on the Main to Frankfurt on the Oder intellectuals debated, offering their views in a seemingly endless pattern of responses to responses to responses. If, as many historians have argued, late-eighteenth century Germany had an expansive and vibrant public sphere, analyzing this debate should reveal much about the public's breadth, depth, and character.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Woellner's time, it has generally been assumed that the public debate about the edict ran in favor of the Enlightenment. The myth making began with Woellner's "enlightened" contemporaries, who believed that they had risen up in reason's name against political reaction. This was a deeply ideological position, since claiming to be reason's vanguard was fundamental to the enlightened elite's sense of mission. As always, however, modern historians failed to note the debate's ideological backdrop when formulating their own positions and largely accepted the enlightened elite's heroic view of itself. Historians' attacks on Woellner and the edict are, therefore, based on a series of assumptions about the foundations of the Enlightenment that are no more than eighteenth-century value judgments. Revisiting the debate about the edict will cast new light on how Woellner's contemporaries and modern historians have constructed their visions of the Enlightenment.

This chapter presents data on the print battles over the Edict on Religion. To modern eyes, the debate was the Enlightenment's last stand against a conservative counter-attack.<sup>2</sup> The data suggest, however, that the reality was quite different. There was strong support among elite circles across Germany for the intent behind Woellner's policies, as fully 55% of the books published

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<sup>1</sup> On the explosion of the German public sphere during the eighteenth century, see Hans Erich Bödeker, *Histoires du Livre: Nouvelles Orientations* (Paris: IMEC Editions, 1995); Andreas Gestrinch, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Günter Birtsch, "Religions- und Gewissensfreiheit in Preussen von 1780 bis 1817," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 11, no. 2 (1984): 177-204; Paul Schwartz, *Der erste Kulturkampf in Preussen um Kirche und Schule (1788-1798)* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1925); Martin Philippson, *Geschichte des preussischen Staatswesens vom Tode Friedrich des Großen bis zu den Freiheitskriegen* (Leipzig: Veit, 1880); Fritz Valjavec's "Das Woellnersche Religionsedikt und seine geschichtlichen Bedeutung" is important because the author accepts the pejorative view of the Edict while asserting that this state response was justified. Valjavec, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze, Südosteuropäische Arbeiten 60* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1963), 294-322; Christina M. Sauter has criticized Valjavec harshly (excessively, in my opinion) for this position. See Sauter, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1989), 186-187; see also Steve Lestition, "Kant and the End of Enlightenment in Prussia," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993): 57-112, for a Hegelian approach to political reaction's victory over the Enlightenment.

supported the measure. This support was consistent regardless of the year or the place of publication. Whether we compare texts published inside Prussia to those from elsewhere, or texts published in 1788 against those published in 1792, texts that supported the edict were always a quantitative match for the “enlightened” opposition. Although the picture will be differentiated further below, the support for the edict has important implications for our view of the Enlightenment. For the last twenty years, historians have seen the Enlightenment through the prism of the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> As the argument currently goes, the public use of reason in print created a critical public space whose independent thinking was inherently corrosive of authority. The French Revolution was, according to this view, the final political effect of reason’s untrammelled reign.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the strong support for the edict within the German public sphere suggests that it was a more politically neutral space than has been assumed.

The publication battle over the edict invites us to reconsider contemporary interpretations of it, since German writers supported the government as much as they subverted it. One could argue that the German public sphere was more conservative than France’s and, hence, less enlightened. Yet, this only begs the question. Approaching the problem of enlightened publicness through the Edict on Religion provides a way out, however. Reconceptualizing the Enlightenment to include Woellner, the edict, and their supporters, opens new paths for understanding the Enlightenment and the public sphere. On the one hand, the public sphere becomes a lively body of discussion that produced many and different perspectives on the relationship of political authority to autonomy. On the other hand, since so many supporters of the edict were “enlightened”, the Enlightenment itself becomes a contested body of discussion with multiple, perhaps incompatible, trajectories.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit*; Dena Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life - Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 1 (1992): 1-20; Habermas, *Structural Transformation*; Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jacob, “The Enlightenment Redefined: The Formation of Modern Civil Society,” *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 475-495; Jacob, “The Mental Landscape of the Public-Sphere - a European Perspective,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 95-113; Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1988); Anthony J. LaVopa, “Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of Modern History* 64, no. March (1992): 98-115; LaVopa, “Herder’s Publikum - Language, Print, and Sociability in 18th-Century Germany,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 1 (1995): 5-24; Colin Lucas, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1987); Benjamin Nathans, “Habermas’ Public-Sphere in the Era of the French-Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 620-644.

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* is the classic exposition of this position.

<sup>5</sup> For discussions of conservatism and liberalism in eighteenth-century Germany, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: the Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966).

Unfortunately, eighteenth-century propagandists and modern historians have used the Edict on Religion as a litmus test for determining the boundaries of the Enlightenment. For some contemporaries, the edict was a sign of the Enlightenment's impending doom. For historians, the edict and the resulting debate were an historical moment in which the Enlightenment proclaimed what enlightenment was not. The debate about the Edict on Religion is, therefore, a unique window onto the problem of enlightenment itself, providing at once insight into the emergence of an eighteenth-century political rhetoric, as well as the origins of a modern historiographical tradition. Reconsidering these debates in this way allows us to welcome the unresolved tensions that the Enlightenment produced without marginalizing those people who do not fit the vision that historians have inherited from its noisiest partisans.<sup>6</sup>

### *Sources and Data Collection*

The data for this chapter were taken mostly from Dirk Kemper's *Mißbrauchte Aufklärung?*, a microfilm collection of 118 texts that were published in response to Woellner's Edict on Religion. Kemper's collection is an excellent resource, the most thorough collection of primary source documents available on the public debate about the edict. For all its virtues, however, the collection is not comprehensive, as it excludes nine texts that Kemper identified without being able to find.<sup>7</sup> Based on Kemper's work, we know, thus, that at least 127 texts were published in response to the edict. None of the texts that Kemper cited as missing were found for this sample, but two

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<sup>6</sup> On conservatism and the Enlightenment, see the following: Beiser, *Enlightenment*; Epstein, *Genesis*; J.G.A. Pocock, "Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England," in *L'Eta dei Lumi* (Naples: Jovene, 1985), 525-562; Pocock, "Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions," *Government and Opposition* 24 (1989): 81-105; Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> The missing texts are: Anonymous, *Apodiktische Erklärung über das Buch Irrthum und Wahrheit (des St. Martin), vom Verfasserselbst* (Wittenberg, 1788); Anonymous, *Ein Wort über die Pflichten eines christlichen Religionslehrers und den Hauptzweck der christlichen Religion, auf Veranlassung einiger neuen kgl. Preuß. Religionsverfügungen* (Cölln, 1795); Anonymous, *Erläuterndes Ja, oder Beweis, dass es eines protestantischen Lehrers Pflicht und Gewissen erfordere, christliche Aufklärung zu befördern* (Berlin, 1788); Anonymous, *Sendschreiben an den Verfasser des Schreibens eines Preussischen Patrioten am 46sten Geburtstage seines Königs. Von einem Freunde des wahren Patriotismus* (Berlin, 1789); Heinrich Benzenberg, *Schreiben an einen Freund über die Amelangische Vertheidigung des Predigers Schulz (zu Gielsdorf)* (Elbersfeld, 1792); Johann Georg Gebhard, *Prüfung der Gründe, welche der Verfasser der kleinen Schrift: Ist ein allgemeiner Landeskatechismus nothing? Und wie müßte er beschaffen seyn? zur Behauptung seiner Meinung beygebracht hat* (Berlin, 1791); Jakob Friedrich Rönning, *Über symbolische Bücher in Bezug aufs Staatsrecht. Zweite Forstsetzung. In 2 Abteilungen* (Rostock, 1793-94); Peter Christlieb Schäffer, *Unpartheyische Gegeneinanderstellung der Entscheidungsgründe zur völligen Beylegung des Streits über symbolische Bücher, und zur Beruhigung der lutherisch-protestantischen Kirche bey dem Glauben an die ächtapostolische Lehre der Augsburgischen Confession von einer stellvertretenden Genugthuung, als eine Fortsetzung der geprüften Prüfung, allen Neologen zur Beherzigung vorgelegt* (Dessau, 1793); Peter Christlieb Schäffer, *Unpartheyische Prüfung der Rönningischen Schrift, in Betreff der neuen preussischen Anordnungen im Geistlichen Fach* (Hamburg, n.d.)

additional texts that Kemper's study overlooked have been uncovered.<sup>8</sup> This raises the total number of texts published on the edict to 129, and expands the working bibliography to 120 texts. The sample on which the analysis below is based contains, thus, 93% of the published texts that historians have been able to identify.

The publication data were collected in a straightforward manner. Based on Kemper's edition and additional research, a basic record was created for each text that included fields for the author's name, book title, place of publication, and publisher.<sup>9</sup> In cases where the author, publisher, or city were originally unknown, but came to light later, the anonymity was noted through a separate field in the individual record. The most important field was the one denoting the author's attitude toward the edict. This field was constructed as a simple binary opposition; authors had to be either "for" or "against" the edict. The authors' positions were established by reading the individual texts, and each was assigned to one of the two groups. All subsequent analyses were based on the assigned records.

The sample of contemporary works on the edict is the most comprehensive available, but also has significant limitations. The first stems from the sample's size. At only 120 items, it can support only the most careful generalizations. This is an issue when the data are cut and rearranged by categories, such as point of origin, date of publication, and opinion. With each additional slice, the population under review gets smaller, and the implications to be drawn become less reliable. Although more will be said about this issue below, it is important to understand that this essay makes no pretense toward describing the attitudes of all Germans, nor does it excavate the boundaries of the entire German public sphere. It is, rather, an attempt to work within an historiographical tradition, reassessing its fundamental assumptions through its supposedly strongest evidence.

The second limitation results, ironically, from a conscious decision to keep the sample small. With one significant exception that will be mentioned later, journal articles have been omitted from the sample to be analyzed. Whereas the sample of articles collected is larger than the book sample, totaling 151 items, this group raises serious concerns about its representativeness. Unlike the sample of books and pamphlets, which included many independent authors who published across Germany, the journal debate rested on a narrow foundation. Most of the articles consisted of book reviews, so that the journal discussion was often merely an extension of the book debate that is already

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<sup>8</sup> The texts are: Anonymous, *Kurze Geschichte der Symbolischen Bücher der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Waltherischen Buchhandlung, 1789); Samuel H. Heinicke, *Geschichte der geheimen Ursachen welche verschiedene königl. Preussl. Consistorialräthe bewogen haben, sich wider das Religionsedikt aufzulehnen: Ein satirisches Originalgemälde* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1789).

<sup>9</sup> The items in the Kemper collection range from four-hundred-page books to pamphlets of just a few pages. On occasion, I refer to all the texts as books for the sake of simplicity. It should, however, be remembered that I use this term loosely.

being covered. Moreover, the articles appeared in a limited number of journals. Despite Germany's burgeoning public sphere in the eighteenth century, the 151 articles on the edict appeared in only fourteen journals overall. Given that German journals of the period were usually one-man operations, having the articles appear in so few journals makes the entire sample suspect. Excluding these journal articles is even more justified, if we consider how unevenly distributed they were. Ninety-four of the 151 articles (62.3%) appeared in one journal, Friedrich Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*. [These works were also collected later and published as a book, Heinrich Philipp Henke's *Beurtheilung aller Schriften welche durch das Königlich Preussische Religionsedikt und durch andre damit zusammenhängende Religionsverfügungen veranlasst sind. Aus der allgem. deutsch. Bibliothek* ("Assessment of all Texts that Were Instigated by the Royal Prussian Edict on Religion and through other Associated Religious Orders. From the Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek")].<sup>10</sup> Kemper included this text in his collection, and it appears in this sample, so the journal debate does appear in this analysis, albeit to a small degree. In addition, three more journals, *Braunschweigisches Journal*, *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung*, and *Monatsschrift von und für Mecklenburg*, accounted for another 25.2% of the total. Thus, four of the fourteen journals (28.6%) accounted for 87.5% of the debate. These texts would be useful for understanding journalistic behavior in the eighteenth century, but their unrepresentative nature requires their exclusion from this study.

Identifying the sample's limitations leads me to the most important issue: how these data are to be applied and to what. As was noted above, this essay works within existing historiographical traditions on the Enlightenment and the public sphere. In almost every instance, historians cite the Edict on Religion as a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment, or as the very embodiment of the Counter-Enlightenment. This position is correct to the extent that those contemporaries, who defined themselves as *the* Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Germany, and whose claim to preeminence historians have reified, tagged their opponents with the Counter-Enlightenment label. Revisiting the Edict on Religion from a less partisan perspective will open these ideological and historiographical processes to critical scrutiny.

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<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Philipp Conrad Henke, *Beurtheilung aller Schriften welche durch das Königlich Preussische Religionsedikt und durch andre damit zusammenhängende Religionsverfügungen veranlasst sind. Aus der allgem. deutsch. Bibliothek*. (Kiel, 1793).

## Justification

The first task in presenting the data is to establish the consistency and reliability of the sample as a whole. That 93% of all the books on the edict appear in the sample anchors this chapter, since it justifies the broad characterizations of the debate that will come later. It is, after all, unlikely that the missing 7% will offer anything fundamentally new or different to a reading of the remaining 93%. With that in mind, Table 1 presents an overview of the sample:

**TABLE 1. ALL TEXTS (120) BY CURRENT AUTHORIAL STATUS AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Attributed</b>	82	68.3%	44	53.7%	38	46.3%
<b>Anonymous</b>	38	31.7	23	60.5	15	39.5
<b>Total</b>	120	100.0	67	55.8	53	44.2

Overall, the debate ran in favor of the edict's supporters —55.8% to 44.2%. These are aggregate figures, of course, and they require further analysis. Nonetheless, Table 1 provides an important point of departure for this discussion: if most of the texts supported the edict, then perhaps opposing the edict was not the *sine qua non* of the Enlightenment in Germany. For that reason, we must refuse the traditional assumption that the edict augured the Enlightenment's ultimate demise and accept both the edict and support for it as a legitimate part of public debate.

Table 1 differentiates this general picture by breaking down the data into two categories, "Attributed" and "Anonymous". Attributed refers to all the texts that were published openly, as well as those texts that were subsequently attributed to the author by other means. This attribution could have been the result of a writer publicly admitting authorship, a contemporary legal investigation, an unmasking by contemporary critics, or by later scholarship. Anonymous refers to those texts whose authors remain unknown, despite the best efforts of modern scholars and contemporary enemies to uncover the authors' identity.

The division between Anonymous and Attributed is not, however, without problems. The absence of authorial information means that we cannot exclude the possibility that a few industrious writers produced all 38 texts, skewing the debate. We will return to this issue later. For now, however, it is important to concentrate on the two-thirds of the sample that does contain authorial information. This percentage is sufficient to justify further analysis,

since it promises a point of comparison against which we can later judge the Anonymous segment's reliability.

Although the sample reveals general, if mild support throughout, opinions varied greatly across regions and over time. The next section analyzes the temporal fluctuations in public attitudes; this section considers the regional aspects of the debate. Table 2 breaks down the discussion according to three categories "Prussian", "Non-Prussian", and "Unclear".

**TABLE 2. ALL TEXTS (120) BY REGION AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Prussian</b>	57	47.5%	40	70.2%	17	29.8%
<b>Non-Prussian</b>	44	36.7	19	43.2	25	56.8
<b>Unclear</b>	19	15.8	8	42.1	11	57.9
<b>Total</b>	120	100.0	67	55.8	53	44.2

Looking at the sample through these categories highlights three important themes that run through the rest of this chapter. The first is Prussia's prominent role as a source of published texts. No matter how one slices the discussion, a large percentage of the debate, in this case 47.5%, originated in Prussia. This is not surprising, as the Edict on Religion was a Prussian law, and one would expect it to have inspired much debate within the kingdom.

The numbers for the Non-Prussian group suggest the second theme: the Edict on Religion was a topic of German-wide interest. Even if the sample size does not justify extrapolating the results to Germany as a whole, the breadth of the print response to the edict tells us, nonetheless, that the issue was important to an elite across eighteenth-century Germany. As Hans Gerth and others have pointed out, this elite *is* the German public sphere in the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This population represents only a narrow band across Germany, but was extremely diverse in its outlook. Members of the German public sphere took their particular positions many reasons, some of which were tied to regional differences. Although the participants often came from similar social backgrounds, the geographic breadth of the discussion suggests that the debate worked on many levels and encompassed a multitude of motivations and perspectives.

Before moving to the third theme, we must confront another methodological issue that the division between Prussian and Non-Prussian texts raises. The texts are categorized by their point of origin, and this raises

<sup>11</sup> Hans Gerth, *Bürgerliche Intelligenz um 1800: zur Soziologie d. dt. Frühliberalismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976); Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

two problems. The first is that we cannot be certain of the individual author's origins. It was, for example, not unheard of for Prussian writers to publish their responses in other principalities. Nor is it certain the non-Prussian writers always published outside of Prussia. On this matter, further research is necessary, since only a prosopographical study of all the writers will support a judgment one way or the other. It is, however, necessary to assume that writers crossed borders often enough to cancel each other out. This means that the statistics provide, at best, a fuzzy lens for viewing the German print world, and any judgments can only be made with caution. Nonetheless, the divisions identified below are consistent enough across time and space that even this dubious lens highlights certain practices that all the actors shared.

The second problem with this division is that information on where a book was published is not always clear, or available. As a result, texts without the requisite information have been put into a separate "Unclear" category. Of the 19 total texts in this Unclear category, only 6 are truly unknown. The remaining 13 texts have ambiguous publication data. In one case, it is not clear whether the text was published in Berlin or Braunschweig; in another, the choice is between Halle and Leipzig. The majority of the texts (11), however, have the publication location listed as Frankfurt und Leipzig, and this raises doubts about whether the publisher was located in Frankfurt on the Main, which was not part of Prussia at the time, or Frankfurt on the Oder, which was. It is more likely that the publishing houses that were located in Leipzig also had offices in Frankfurt on the Main, as opposed to Frankfurt on the Oder, since Frankfurt on the Main and Leipzig were both major publishing centers. Without additional evidence, however, the Unclear texts must remain a separate category.

Although Unclear texts are separate from the Prussian and Non-Prussian ones, there is reason to suspect that they belong with the Non-Prussian group. For example, the numerical breakdown of support to opposition is almost identical in both cases. Whereas the breakdown in the Unclear category was 42.1% for and 57.9% against, the Non-Prussian group was 43.2% for and 56.8% against. This may be merely a coincidence, so one should not read too much into the similarities now. Yet, as we will see below, exploring these similarities through other contexts will justify connecting these two groups.

The difference between the Prussian and the Non-Prussian sub-groups highlights the third theme: there was a significant difference between elite public opinion in Prussia and opinion in other German states. People who published outside Prussia were less likely to support the edict than were people who published inside Prussia. Whereas, fully 70% of the texts published within Prussia supported the edict, only 43% of the texts from non-Prussian areas did the same. It has been suggested that Prussia's conservative censorship practices guaranteed that only supportive texts would be published, but this answer is, as we will see, inadequate. There are, however,

other ways of understanding this gap. Prussia as a state was a political issue in itself. A revisionist state that threatened existing political arrangements, Prussia offered outsiders many reasons to be against the edict beyond the edict's actual strictures. That is to say, opposition to the edict could have merely been a convenient mask for a more general aversion to Prussia. More will be said later about the dynamics this injected into public opinion. For now, however, we must recognize only that the Prussian/Non-Prussian split was central to the debate.

### ***Breakdown of Currently Attributed Texts***

This section analyzes the "Attributed" section from Table 1 to Table 3 below breaks down the numbers within the Attributed group according to region and opinion. The numbers are, unsurprisingly, similar to those for the entire population. We must, however, be careful not to read too much into these parallels. They may, in fact, be an artifact of the data, since this subcategory represents two-thirds of the original sample (82 of the total 120). Nonetheless, if we understand this as merely one step in a larger process, then looking carefully at the Attributed group can help us put into perspective not only the sample as a whole but also the remaining Anonymous segment.

**TABLE 3. TEXTS ATTRIBUTED CURRENTLY (82) BY REGION AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Prussian</b>	39	47.6%	27	69.2%	12	30.8%
<b>Non-Prussian</b>	33	40.2	13	39.4	20	60.6
<b>Unclear</b>	10	12.2	4	40.0	6	60.0
<b>Total</b>	82	100.0	45	54.9	37	45.1

As before, Prussian texts represent about half the total in the category, and support for the edict among these Prussian texts remains almost unchanged, comprising 69.2% of the total. The situation also remained substantially the same among Non-Prussian texts and Unclear texts, revealing roughly a 60%-40% split against the edict.

Having authorial information on 82 of the texts is important for establishing whether the sample was evenly distributed. In this case, 60 writers produced the 82 books for an average of 1.4 books per author. That this average is so close to 1 suggests that no one dominated this Attributed part of the debate. Even so, as the higher number indicates, some people contributed more than others. Eighteen out of these 60 authors, or 30% wrote

more than one book. Fifteen writers contributed 2 books. Two writers each wrote 3 books. One published 4 books. Thus, the most active third of the population contributed 45.1% (40 out of 82) of the total books for which we know the author. This averages out to 2.2 books per author, which suggests that the prolific group was important to the debate, though it did not dictate the entire discussion.

Although prolific authors did not dominate the entire debate, that they contributed such a high percentage of texts warrants further consideration. Since prolific writers produced almost half the total texts, it is still possible this group skewed the overall numbers. A closer look at the spectrum of opinion within this group, however, shows otherwise. Much like the rest of the sample, a significant split in opinion over the edict existed within this prolific subgroup. Of the 18 authors that wrote more than one book, 8 (44.4%) were in favor of the edict and 10 (55.6%) were opposed.<sup>12</sup> In terms of texts, this translated into 17 books for the edict and 23 against, or a 42.5% to 57.5% split. Thus, even if the debates among the prolific writers went against the edict, there is no reason to conclude that their influence skewed the rest of the sample. In fact, this breakdown suggests that the conservative trend in the aggregate numbers is understated.

Looking at the numbers from this perspective is important in two ways. First, the roughly equal split among prolific authors shows that the edict exposed a deep rift at all levels of debate. There is, thus, every reason to believe that the overall numbers in Tables 1 and 2 represent a true cross-section of elite public opinion. Second, the change in the percentages from the Attributed population's 55%-45% split for the edict to the prolific subgroup's 57%-42% split against offers another view of the ideology behind the "enlightened" view of the edict. Prolific writers, among whom were "enlightened" people such as Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, Ernst Christian Trapp, and Peter Villaume, were slightly more likely to oppose the edict than to support it. As a result, historians were much more likely to see opposition to the edict as the "enlightened" thing to do, since the people they already identified as enlightened were opposed to the edict.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, it is important that prolific authors on both sides of the debate roughly cancelled each other out. The proof lies in a closer look at the numbers. If we throw out the most productive authors and consider only the

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<sup>12</sup> Two of the books among the group in favor of the edict are problematic. Johann Samuel Diterich, an "enlightened" writer in Berlin, wrote the books well before the edict was published and later dissociated himself from them, writing off their conservative tone to youthful ignorance. Diterich was actually opposed to the edict and to the publication of these books. Woellner, however, learned of the books and published them without the author's permission. I have included the texts in spite of their contested provenance because they were part of the debate, although it may be better to see Woellner as the author, rather than Diterich. It will, however, be useful to keep in mind that the numbers I use are "soft" rather than "hard." On Diterich, see Schwartz, *Kulturkampf*.

<sup>13</sup> On this point, I have been influenced by the following works: Jacob, "The Enlightenment Redefined"; Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

15 writers who wrote 2 books each, the most common level of “prolific” involvement, we find 7 writers for the edict and 8 against.<sup>14</sup> Thus in general, even among the most productive writers, the elite among the elite, opinions toward the edict were narrowly divided. More importantly perhaps, if the slight advantage the edict’s opponents enjoyed among elite writers skewed the debate at all, it was in the direction of the “enlightened” position on the edict. This is important, since it suggests that conservative influence in the debate was more broadly distributed than the supposedly enlightened opposition.

Having looked at the distribution of opinions among the elite, let us turn now to the distribution of texts among regions in Germany. We have already seen from Table 3 that Prussian texts were a major factor in the debate overall. Among the 82 attributed books, 39 (47.6%) were published within Prussia, 33 (40.2%) outside of Prussia, and 10 (12.2%) have no clear information. Although these numbers are consistent with those of the general sample, they again present us with the problem of unclear origins. As before, only a few of the texts (3 out of 10) have absolutely no information on origin. Six among this group are listed as published in “Frankfurt und Leipzig”. Since it is not clear whether Frankfurt refers to Frankfurt on the Main or Frankfurt on the Oder, they are listed separately. In one other case, it is not clear whether the text was published in Halle or Leipzig, so it has been set aside as well.

As before, the percentage breakdowns in this subcategory suggest the Unclear sections of the public debate should be part of the Non-Prussian group. In both the general population of 120 and the subcategory of 82 texts, the breakdown of opinions on the edict is almost identical. For the total sample of 120, the split among the Non-Prussian texts is 57% against to 43% for; among the Unclear group it was 58%-42% against. For the subcategory of 82, the breakdown among the Non-Prussian texts is 61%-39% against; among the Unclear group it was 60%-40% against.

That the group of 82 would have substantially the same characteristics as the total population is, of course, not surprising. The point, however, is not to show that removing these 82 from the larger sample produces the same breakdown, but to establish a benchmark for evaluating the Anonymous group’s characteristics. Based on what we have seen so far, it seems that the group of 82 Attributed books provides a broad, differentiated picture of elite public opinion inside and outside Prussia. If the group of 38 Anonymous texts shares the same basic characteristics with the group of 82, especially in its breadth, then the larger sample of 120 becomes a more reliable platform for

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<sup>14</sup> Jakob Friedrich Rönberg, who was one of seven writers that supported the edict, ought probably to be excluded from this group, since he seems to have written 3 books on the edict. One of his books is, however, among those neither Kemper nor I have been able to find. I have, for that reason, treated him as a two-time author.

judging contemporary attitudes toward, and later constructions of the edict's relationship to the Enlightenment.

### *Breakdown of Currently Anonymous Texts*

Although the sample appears solid thus far, with almost 1/3 of the texts (38 out of 120) unattributed today, the analysis of the full 120 could be skewed, were one or two authors to have written all the works in this subcategory. We need, thus, to establish that this is unlikely. As Table 4 shows, of the 38 unattributed texts, 23 (60.5%) were in favor of the edict and 15 (39.5%) were against it.

**TABLE 4. TEXTS CURRENTLY ANONYMOUS (38) BY REGION AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Prussian</b>	18	47.4%	13	72.2%	5	27.8%
<b>Non-Prussian</b>	11	28.9	6	54.5	5	45.5
<b>Unclear</b>	9	23.7	4	44.4	5	55.6
<b>Total</b>	38	100.0	23	60.5	15	39.5

According to these numbers, this subcategory had the same basic characteristics as the larger, Attributed group, with the texts supporting the edict more than half the time. In fact, the anonymously published texts seem to have been more supportive than the larger attributed group, a difference that will be important below.

These are only similarities, of course, and it is still possible that this subcategory was skewed by a few people's excessive influence. This subdivision's consistency must, therefore be tested, and this is done by comparing the number of books per author across the two groups. The 2.1 books per prolific author derived from evidence above will serve as a benchmark, and if a similar number of books per author can be attributed to the 38 Anonymous texts, then it can be assumed that this subcategory is as reliable as the group of 82 above.

I begin with the climate of opinion within the group of 38. Among the anonymous texts, there is a basic 60%-40% split in favor of the edict. This split provides a starting-point for estimating how many writers were behind these texts. Let us begin with the proposition that no fewer than two people were likely the source of these 38 works. It does not, after all, make sense to assume that one person regularly published on both sides of the issue. This leaves us with an average of 19 books per imaginary author.

The number of likely authors is still too small, but it can be expanded by considering the geographic distribution of the cities of publication. The more widely the cities are distributed, the less likely it is that only a few people were behind all the books. 5.4 reveals that of the 38 unattributed texts, 18 (48.7%) were published inside Prussia, 11 (28.2%) outside Prussia, and in 9 cases, the origin is unclear.<sup>15</sup> Now we can move beyond the conservative assumption that only two people were involved. Public opinion was sharply divided in all sub-groups. Of the anonymous texts published outside Prussia, 6 (55%) supported the edict and 5 (45%) opposed it. Of those texts published inside Prussia, 13 (72%) supported the edict, and 5 (28%) opposed it. These numbers are consistent with those derived from the general and the Attributed groupings.

Considering the geography as I have done raises the problem of unclear origins again. It made sense above to assume the Unclear and Non-Prussian groups belonged together, but the same cannot be done here. In this case, the Unclear texts must drop out entirely, because this group cannot be adequately justified. Since a difference of opinion within a group is taken to mean that no fewer than two authors were at work, this assumption works only when the evidence is clear. In this case, however, the Unclear group exists due to a lack of, or confusion in the evidence and cannot provide a sound basis for speculation either way. Erring on the side of caution requires that these texts be excluded. With this in mind, we can assume now that there are no fewer than four authors for the 38 texts: one person on each side of the issue in each of the two categories, Prussian and Non-Prussian. We are, thus, left with an average of 9.5 works per author.

The arguments above do not preclude the possibility that only two people were involved, but a closer look at the geography makes such a scenario extremely unlikely. The 38 Anonymous texts were published in at least 10 different cities, 3 of them inside Prussia, and 7 outside. The cities in question included big ones such as Hamburg, Berlin, and Leipzig, as well as smaller places such as Wittenberg, Stendal, and Görlitz. Referring back to Table 4, we see that among the 11 texts that were *definitely* published outside Prussia, 6 were for the edict, and 5 were against. The 6 in favor of the edict were published in 6 different cities, Chemnitz, Frankfurt on the Main, Hamburg, Leipzig, Weissenfels, and Wittenberg. The 5 that opposed the edict were

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<sup>15</sup> As was the case above, a few texts (5) were attributed to “Frankfurt and Leipzig,” requiring that they be left out. If the 5 texts are assumed to be outside of Prussia, the split between works published inside and outside Prussia is 19 to 16, or 48% to 41% of the total, a relationship consistent with the numbers derived from the sample of attributed texts, as well as the overall numbers. If, however, the texts also stem from Prussia, then the picture changes slightly, as four of the five texts supported the edict. This would, however, support my finding below that Prussian opinion was more conservative than the general population’s. Nonetheless, there are simply too few examples to draw such general conclusions. Much more important is that the support for the edict inside and outside Prussia remains consistent through all sub-categories.

published in four different cities, Frankfurt on the Main, Görlitz, Hamburg, and Leipzig.

Looking at the cities of publication in this way leaves us with 11 texts that were published in 7 different cities outside Prussia. If we begin with the 3 cities in which texts were published on each side of the issue, Frankfurt on the Main, Hamburg, and Leipzig, and assume that no person published in more than one city, then no fewer than 6 people were involved in this section of the subcategory. Moreover, if we include the 4 other cities in the analysis, Chemnitz, Görlitz, Weissenfels, and Wittenberg, we have reason to add 4 more authors to the total. These cities were relatively small and it is unlikely that one author published in more than one of them. This raises the number of likely authors to 10.

Applying the same methods to the Prussian subcategory in Table 4 yields a similar result. Of the 18 texts published inside Prussia 13 were for and 5 against the edict. The texts appeared in a total of three cities, Berlin, Stendal, and Halle. In Berlin, 12 texts were published for the edict and 3 against. In Stendal, 1 text was published for the edict, and two texts came out of Halle —1 for and 1 against the edict. If we presume again that authors did not generally publish on both sides of the issue, then we have no fewer than 2 authors in Berlin, 2 in Halle, and one in Stendal. This leaves us with a low-end figure of at least 5 authors within Prussia. Adding this number to the Non-Prussian total above increases the likely total of writers to 15.

The large number of texts published in Berlin (12) presents another problem. Based on everything else the data have revealed, it does not make any sense to assume that only 2 writers wrote the 12 twelve books. This would mean six books per imaginary writer, an unheard of quantity on the topic. The number of likely authors drops to a reasonable level if we consider Berlin's situation in the light of data from the group of 82. (See Table 1). First, we know that even the most prolific writers in the currently Attributed group rarely published more than 2 books; only three times did someone publish more than 2 books. Second, if we consider only the works among this currently Attributed group that were definitely published in Berlin, then 17 different people published 23 texts, with nobody publishing more than two. This represents an average of 1.35 texts per author for currently Attributed books published in Berlin.

Without evidence to the contrary, we have no reason to suspect that behavior among the Anonymous Berliners was any different from the Attributed ones. With this in mind, we can use the results from the 82 Attributed texts as a guide. Taking a conservative figure of 2 books per author, the likely number of authors comes out to no fewer than 6 (12 divided by 2). This leaves us with a final count of 9 authors within Prussia —6 in Berlin, 2 in Halle, and 1 in Stendal. We can now revise the estimate of likely authors up to 19 from the previous estimate of 15. Combining the Prussian and

Non-Prussian subdivisions in Table 4 above means that no fewer than 19 authors likely produced the 38 anonymous books. This averages out to 2 books per author, which is just under the average of 2.1 that was calculated for the larger group of 82. We can, therefore, assume that the 38 anonymous texts were as broadly distributed as the rest of the sample proved to be.

### *Interpretation*

Today, historians generally hold that the edict and the subsequent oppression that accompanied it was a result of conservative reaction to new social and political forces.<sup>16</sup> The “genesis of German conservatism”, as Klaus Epstein has called it, lies in opposition to three factors: 1) modernizing forces that reform-minded princes had unleashed, 2) enlightened intellectual debates, 3) the French Revolution. The edict was, as has been argued previously, a legitimate outcome of the Enlightenment itself. In this respect, what many have seen as a conservative reaction to change was the outcome of contradictory processes that were deeply rooted in eighteenth-century public discussions.

The point of this work, however, is not to disprove contemporary interpretations of conservatism’s origins, but to show how intellectual life in the eighteenth century does not fit into convenient oppositions. Whether the dichotomies are set up as Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment, Pre-Revolution/Post-Revolution, or Conservative/Liberal, no division adequately captures the tensions that motivated eighteenth-century debates. This section attacks all three of these dichotomies by showing how support for the edict was consistent regardless of the external political factors that other historians have seen as determinative. The argument is not that these factors had no effect on attitudes in Germany, but that they *interacted* with deep-seated attitudes and behavior patterns common to Germany’s intellectual elite. In this respect, the reactionary instincts some have applied to politics in the French Revolution’s wake were already deeply embedded in processes of public communication.

Before considering more of the numbers behind the edict, we must return to the problem of sample size. In addition to breaking the debate down along the categories that were used above, many of the tables below follow the course of the debate across time. The numbers in each subcategory get smaller with every successive division, and in some instances the relevant subcategories consist of only a few books. In this context, we must keep in mind that these statistics are merely illustrative. They are important because they reveal the same fundamental trends that were apparent in the aggregate

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<sup>16</sup> Kemper, *Aufklärung*, 55-114; Beiser, *Enlightenment*; Lestition, “Kant and the End of Enlightenment”.

figures above, but they are not absolute proof. That the same trends persist, nonetheless, through all divisions indicates how deeply-seated the beliefs and practices in question really were.

*The Structure of Debate I: The Publication Battle across Time*

Tracing the publication battle over the edict across time throws into relief the many political contexts that stood behind the debate. It is difficult to isolate any single factor that influenced public opinion, but then this is the whole point. It is important to recognize the interplay between political events at the end of the eighteenth century and the German Enlightenment’s basic structures of debate. Table 5 provides a temporal overview of the debate and sets the boundaries for the rest of this discussion.

**TABLE 5. ALL TEXTS BY YEAR AND OPINION (1788-1800)**

Year	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
1788	33	27.5%	17	51.5%	16	48.5%
1789	32	26.7	22	68.8	10	31.3
1790	16	13.3	10	62.5	6	37.5
1791	10	8.3	4	40.0	6	60.0
1792	16	13.3	11	68.8	5	31.3
1793	4	3.3	1	25.0	3	75.0
1794	1	0.8	0	0.0	1	100.0
1795	2	1.7	1	50.0	1	50.0
1796	2	1.7	0	0.0	2	100.0
1797	0	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A
1798	2	1.7	0	0.0	2	100.0
1799	0	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A
1800	1	0.8	0	0.0	1	100.0
No Date	1	0.8	1	100.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	120	100.0	67	55.8	53	44.2

This table reveals again how fierce the battle between the edict's supporters and opponents was. As before, however, there is more to these numbers than a first glance allows, since they also contain a complex series of shifts.

In order to understand these shifts within the debate, we must narrow the analysis's temporal boundaries. This is justified in two ways. First, 89% of the debate occurred within the first five years (1788-1792) after the edict's promulgation. Thus, after 1792, the debate is essentially over and we can learn the most from looking at the opinions expressed when the edict was still topical. Second, 54.2% of the debate occurred within the first two years (1788-1789). As we will see, this is the crucial period for understanding the debate, since it allows us to read the debate for the influence of external political events. This will then allow us to approach from yet another angle the ideological process behind the debate.

Let us begin by looking at the impact on this debate of the late eighteenth century's most important event, the French Revolution. The statistics in Table 5 suggest that number of books published on the edict reflects the events in France —always diminishing in the period immediately after a political watershed there. In the summer of 1789, the Revolution broke out, and at the star of 1793, Louis XVI was executed. It is, thus, suggestive that the years 1790 and 1793 saw significant changes in production. In 1788 and 1789, Germans published 65 books on the edict, or 32.5 books per year. In 1790, however, only 16 books appeared, and only 26 more books were published during the subsequent two years. This means that in the three years following the French Revolution's outbreak (1790-1792), Germans published only an average of 14 books per year on the edict, as compared to the initial 32.5 per year. By 1793, the debate stalled almost completely, with only 4 books published that year, and this was only the beginning of a slide into oblivion.

Although the French Revolution seems to have affected the debate about the edict, we also need to keep other factors in mind. It is, for example, possible that the Edict on Religion as a political issue only had a few years of life in it. After five years of debate, one may expect everything that could be said to have been said, no matter how inventive German intellectuals were. In addition, it could also be that censorship practices in the various German states affected the debate's tone. We will deal with this issue further below. At this point, however, it is important to understand that although the French Revolution was a significant force, it was only one influence on German debates. Thus, rather than seeing events on the other side of the Rhine as an unambiguous causal factor, we will need to balance their effects on the debate about the edict against other domestic influences.

These caveats aside, the French Revolution's influence appears most obvious if we consider the spectrum of opinion between 1788 and 1792. (See Table 5) In 1788, the debate over the edict was even, with 17 books appearing

in favor of edict and 16 against. This roughly 50%-50% split changed over the next four years, as opinion shifted in favor of the edict. In 1789, the count was 22 in favor to 10 against, a 68.8%-31.3% split. In 1790, it was 10 to 6, or a 62.5%-37.5% split, and in 1792, the percentages were the same as for 1789, a 68.8%-31.3% split. 1791 is the only year to break with this general pattern; the edict's supporters wrote 4 books to opponents' 6. These numbers are important on two levels. First, they show that the increase in support for the edict after 1789 could not have been part of a political reaction, since such public support was already well established before the French Revolution's outbreak. Second, they raise another important issue. Namely, what was the source of this increase in support for the edict?

### *The Structure of Debate II: Opinions and Regions*

Looking at the German reaction to the French Revolution through the controversy over the Edict on Religion reveals more than merely a counter-revolutionary groundswell. Examining the shifts in opinion on the edict by year and region suggests, as always, how complicated the eighteenth-century political world was. Table 6 breaks down the publication statistics for Prussian texts published between 1788 and 1792.

**TABLE 6. PRUSSIAN TEXTS BY YEAR (1788-92) AND OPINION**

Year	Number	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>1788</b>	21	13	61.9%	8	38.1%
<b>1789</b>	13	9	69.2	4	30.8
<b>1790</b>	8	7	87.5	1	12.5
<b>1791</b>	7	4	57.1	3	42.9
<b>1792</b>	6	6	100.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	55	39	70.9	16	29.1

The percentage breakdowns of support to opposition for the first two years make clear that support for the edict remained consistent right up to the Revolution. There was a slight bump between 1788 and 1789 that may be related to the Revolution, but the change is insignificant. In fact, the change is remarkably small, if we consider that the Revolution occurred in July, leaving the contributors five more months to get their responses out. The most significant change in opinion appeared in 1790. Between 1788 and 1790 there was a roughly 50% increase in support for the edict, and this indicates that France's political problems affected Prussian opinion. Nonetheless, this

increase was rooted in a specific context: support for the edict was already prominent before the Revolution's advent.

The need to consider the context of opinion formation is even more important when we consider the Non-Prussian texts. Increase in support for the edict between 1788 and 1789 was most dramatic outside of Prussia. As Table 7 shows, support for the edict increased from 33.3% in 1788 to 69.2% in 1789.

**TABLE 7. NON-PRUSSIAN TEXTS BY YEAR (1788-92) AND OPINION**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>For</b>	<b>% For (Number)</b>	<b>Against</b>	<b>% Against (Number)</b>
<b>1788</b>	6	2	33.3%	4	66.7%
<b>1789</b>	13	9	69.2	4	30.8
<b>1790</b>	7	3	42.9	4	57.1
<b>1791</b>	2	0	0.0	2	100.0
<b>1792</b>	8	4	50.0	4	50.0
<b>Total</b>	36	18	50.0	18	50.0

This change raises an interesting issue. Non-Prussian authors had as much time as Prussian ones to respond to the Revolution before 1789 was out. Yet, the shift in opinion was much more dramatic, representing over a 100% increase in support. Moreover, during the following year (1790) support for the edict remained above what it was in 1788. This leads to an important caveat: although the increase in support seems attributable to the Revolution, its effects are difficult to disentangle from other possibilities. This is because authors outside Prussia had as little time as Prussians to respond to the Revolution before the year was out. It is, therefore, possible that a groundswell in support for the edict began before the Revolution and continued through that year into 1790, which also showed a greater level of support than was present in 1788. Moreover, the drop in support for the edict between 1789 and 1790 may be related to the specter that Prussia presented to many Germans in other lands. A similar phenomenon appears among the Unclear texts, as Table 8 shows.

TABLE 8. UNCLEAR TEXTS BY YEAR (1788-92) AND OPINION

Year	Number	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
1788	6	2	33.3%	4	66.7%
1789	6	4	66.7	2	33.3
1790	1	0	0.0	1	100.0
1791	1	0	0.0	1	100.0
1792	2	1	50.0	1	50.0
<b>Total</b>	16	7	43.7	9	56.3

At the very least, we can say that the German publishing elite in and outside Prussia came to the edict's aid. Whether the response was due to the Revolution exclusively, or whether other factors were involved must be explored further.

I have been arguing that too strong an emphasis on identifying the causes of political reaction has led historians to overemphasize the importance of historical dichotomies, such as Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment, and Pre-/Post-Revolution. Taken together, the data in Tables 6-8 underscore the problem with traditional approaches, but also offer insight into the complexities behind public debate. The statistics in Table 6 show us that although reaction to the French Revolution was important, it occurred within an established political context. In 1790, 7 out of 8 (87.5%) of the texts published in Prussia were against the edict, which represents a 24% increase in support over the previous year. This is a significant change, but hardly one that augurs a wholesale change in the elite's attitude. After 1790, the situation becomes even more interesting. The next two years, 1791 and 1792, bring an odd reversal in the debate. In 1791, support for the edict among books published in Prussia actually dropped to 57%, before bouncing to 100% the following year. This raises an important question: how could elite public opinion be so volatile in a reactionary society? The mystery of volatility in Prussia deepens if we look to the Non-Prussian and Unclear texts as well. As Table 7 shows, in 1790 support for the edict among texts from outside Prussia was 42.9%. The following year it was 0%, before returning to 50% in 1792. Table 8 reveals a similar trend for the Unclear texts.

Considering Tables 6-8 together suggest three things about public debate in Germany that have been missed. First, much of the increase in support for the edict between the years 1788 and 1789 actually came from outside of Prussia. Prussian public opinion, as revealed in the books on the edict,

remained consistently in favor of the edict, and it hardly seems fair to characterize Prussia as the center of reaction when so much of the actual *reaction* stemmed from outside its borders. Second, political events in France did affect the debate about the edict, but not in the ways that traditional arguments have held. The years after 1789 and 1792 show a drop in the total *number* of publications, but reveal no change in the percentages for and against. Thus, judging by the debate about the edict, Germany's elite was in favor of controlling the common people's social behavior before the French Revolution arrived. The Revolution cast these issues in a new and more desperate light, but the instinct to increase daily social control was present before anyone stormed the Bastille.

The third point is, however, the most important. The numbers above suggest that the discussion also had its internal dynamics. Between 1788 and 1792, the relative numbers of texts produced both inside and outside Prussia betray a speak-and-response rhythm. We can see in Tables 6-8 that the political pendulum continually swings in the opposite direction from the previous year. Whenever one side of the debate seemed to get the upper hand, the other side counterattacked the following year. This is another way of highlighting the points that were made in this and previous chapters. The elite in Germany carried on their public discussion according to their own well-established rules and practices. These rules and practices represent an important continuity that runs through contemporary political events and, as the next chapter reveals, they have important implications for our historical approaches to eighteenth-century Germany.

### ***Structures of Debate III: Anonymity and Public Debate***

The political backdrop of Revolutionary-inspired repression is not sufficient for explaining the conservative support for the Edict on Religion. If we consider Table 5 again with the Prussian political context in mind, it becomes clear that the debate over the edict was most vigorous and even at precisely the moment when debate was freest. The Edict on Censorship was promulgated on December 19, 1788, and the French Revolution would not arrive for another seven months. Moreover, as chapter 3 substantiated, prosecutions under the Edict on Censorship of authors who violated the Edict on Religion began only in December of 1790, and were miserable failures on top of that. Thus, books that were published in the first two years after the edict's promulgation were written before the factors that others have identified as sources of reaction could have taken effect.

The Enlightenment in Germany was not only conservative but this conservatism was also a legitimate part of being enlightened. Nonetheless, it is possible that other traditionally cited factors exerted a greater influence. Other historians have emphasized two factors as explanations for the

preponderance of conservative support for the edict: 1) increasing state censorship became a barrier to publication of liberal opinions, 2) the lure of potential state benefits induced conservatives to publish in favor of the edict.<sup>17</sup> On the first point, whereas censorship did play an important role in the publishing world, themselves were often so closely tied to writers and publishers that their actual effect on the business could be liberating rather than repressive. This was especially the case in Prussia, where lenient censorship had become a practical rule. It is true that Friedrich Nicolai and his *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* had to flee Prussia, but this was in March of 1794, well after the French Revolution had entered its most radical phase. Moreover, if Prussia was the most repressive of German states and authors fled to other principalities to publish work critical of Prussian policies, then how do we explain the *increase* in support for the edict among Non-Prussian texts between 1788 and 1790?

Explaining support through the desire to please the state is an equally dubious proposition. The data suggest that supportive authors could hardly have been subject to such inducements, since most of the public debate was held anonymously. As Table 9 shows, of the total works analyzed, 68.3% (82) were originally published anonymously.

**TABLE 9. ALL TEXTS (120) BY ORIGINAL AUTHORIAL STATUS AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Attributed</b>	38	31.7%	22	57.9%	16	42.1%
<b>Anonymous</b>	82	68.3	45	54.9	37	45.1
<b>Total</b>	120	100.0	67	55.8	53	44.2

One might expect that authors who were critical of the edict made up the bulk of the originally anonymous population. In fact, the opposite was the case. Texts that were *originally* published anonymously supported the edict 54.9% of the time.

The climate of opinion across Germany was consistently in favor of the edict. The Originally Anonymous group, for example, supported the edict as often as did the Originally Attributed group (54.9% in favor v. 57.9% in favor). Moreover, whereas 45 of the 67 (67.2%) books published in support of the edict were published anonymously, of the 53 texts published against the edict 37 (69.8%) were anonymous. Some additional context will enrich this point. As

<sup>17</sup> Epstein, *Genesis; Lestition, "Kant and the End of Enlightenment"*; James Schmidt ed., *What is Enlightenment?: eighteenth-century answers and twentieth-century questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

we already know, 38 of the 120 works published are *still* unattributed. Of these 38, 24 (63.2%) were in favor of the edict. If conservative authors were trying to curry favor with the government by supporting the edict, publishing anonymously was an extremely ineffective tactic.

Table 10 makes the same point about anonymity's central role in public debate from another angle. During the first two years of the debate (1788-89), when conditions were freest, 78.8% and then 75% of the texts were published anonymously.

**TABLE 10. ALL TEXTS BY YEAR AND AUTHORIAL STATUS (1788-1800)**

Year	Number	Anonymous	% Number	Attributed	% Number
1788	33	26	78.8%	7	21.2%
1789	32	24	75.0	8	25.0
1790	16	9	56.3	7	43.8
1791	10	4	40.0	6	60.0
1792	16	11	68.8	5	31.3
1793	4	1	25.0	3	75.0
1794	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
1795	2	2	100.0	0	0.0
1796	2	1	50.0	1	50.0
1797	0	0	N/A	0	N/A
1798	2	1	50.0	1	50.0
1799	0	0	N/A	0	N/A
1800	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
No Date	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	120	82	68.3	38	31.7

Anonymous debate was the foundation of public discussion in eighteenth-century Germany. Consider that in 1788, of the 17 works published *in favor* of the edict, 14 (82.4%) were anonymous. The situation is similar on the other side of the debate. Of the 16 works published against the edict, 12 (75%) were anonymous. This pattern is consistent for the following year as well. In 1789, 16 of 22 (72.7%) in favor of the edict were anonymous, and 8 of 10 (80%) texts against the edict were anonymous. Indeed, the proportion of anonymous to credited texts remains significant throughout the first five years of the

discussion, averaging 52% among texts for the edict, and 64% among those against.

One could understand, of course, if the edict’s opponents were loathe to reveal their names. Nonetheless, that supporters remained largely anonymous, in spite of the potential rewards for going public, suggests that anonymity was the preferred position for all authors, regardless of the state’s position. More importantly, it reveals that a print culture existed whose rules unified many of the authors in ways that went beyond their political differences. The importance of these common rules becomes apparent if we look at the originally anonymous texts from a regional perspective. Table 11 breaks down the originally anonymous texts by region and opinion.

**TABLE 11. TEXTS ORIGINALLY ANONYMOUS (82) BY REGION AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Prussian</b>	41	50.0%	28	68.3%	13	31.7%
<b>Non-Prussian</b>	25	30.5	10	40.0	15	60.0
<b>Unclear</b>	16	19.5	7	43.8	9	56.3
<b>Total</b>	82	100.0	45	54.9	37	45.1

As one might expect, the texts published within Prussia favored the edict strongly, coming in at 68.3% in favor and 31.7% against. The Non-Prussian and Unclear texts follow the now well-established pattern of external opposition, constituting roughly a 60%-40% split against.

The results in Table 11 underscore how important it is to see the debate about the edict from multiple perspectives. First, the disparity between Prussian/Non-Prussian climates of opinion suggests that Prussian politics itself was an important factor in the debate.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the initial negative reaction to the edict from outside Prussia may have been a product of regional prejudice as much as it was an enlightened reaction against an intrusive law. Second, if we add the Unclear texts to the Non-Prussian ones—admittedly a problematic enterprise—then we see that more texts *in favor* of the edict were published *outside* Prussia than were published *against* the edict *within* Prussia. This is to say, that however much some of the elite may have been opposed to Prussia, there was still a great deal of elite sentiment in favor of the edict elsewhere. Once again, we confront a broad and diverse intellectual environment with rules that were much less rigid than our historical interpretations.

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, *Genesis*.

The commonalities even more apparent if we reverse our position and look at the debate from the perspective of 38 texts originally published openly. Table 12 breaks down the numbers for this group along the same lines as Table 5.

**TABLE 12. TEXTS ATTRIBUTED ORIGINALLY (38) BY REGION AND OPINION**

	Number	% Total	For	% For (Number)	Against	% Against (Number)
<b>Prussian</b>	16	42.1%	12	75.0%	4	25.0%
<b>Non-Prussian</b>	19	50.0	9	47.4	10	52.6
<b>Unclear</b>	3	7.9	1	33.3	2	66.7
<b>Total</b>	38	100.0	22	57.9	16	42.1

Again, we see a structure of opinion not significantly different from that in Table 5, even though all these writers published openly. The first and most remarkable aspect of these numbers is that the breakdown for the entire subgroup resembles closely the entire population's breakdown. Whereas the entire group of 120 texts supported the edict 55.8% to 44.2%, this *public* group of 38 supported the edict 57.9% to 42.1%. Were this subgroup to consist of people currying the state's favor, one would expect a sharp increase in support for the edict. This, however, was not the case. No matter how we slice it, the structure of opinion remained consistent.

## *Conclusiones*

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We are beginning to see the outlines of an intellectual world whose rules and structures extended through and beyond the divisions historians have generally seen as decisive. Not only do the Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment dichotomy and the supposedly emancipatory public sphere fail to explain the actual climate of opinion surrounding the edict but the French Revolution and its attending political reaction also offer few answers. We are, thus, in the midst of a world peculiar to eighteenth-century Germany, where the rules we moderns have established do not seem to obtain. The point then is to understand the course of public debate through the practices and categories that the participants used. Understanding the tensions that these categories themselves created will bring us closer to the practices of the participants and help us to reflect further on the problem of understanding the Enlightenment without reference to the value judgments of a few elite writers and thinkers.

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