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Naumann, Friedrich

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Naumann, *Friedrich*

German politician and writer

Born 25 March 1860 in Störmthal, Germany

Died 24 August 1919 in Travemünde, Germany

Friedrich Naumann was a key figure in German liberalism in the late Kaiserreich, where he tried to reunite Left and National Liberals. In 1915, he published a widely read book on “*Mitteleuropa*” (Central Europe) which sought to give a liberal answer to the question of German war aims.

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1. Career before the War

Son of a conservative saxonian clergyman, Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919) chose, at first, the same career path as his father. Influenced by the national spirit that was generated by the founding of the German *Kaiserreich*, as well as his own experiences with the so-called “social question” as young clergyman, he wanted to combine reforms within the German state and society with an [imperialistic](#) foreign policy that rested upon a strong fleet as well as overseas colonies. Therefore, Naumann, who was also deeply involved in the “*Kulturprotestantismus*” (Cultural Protestant Movement), especially with the “*Evangelisch-Soziale Kongreß*” (Evangelical Social Congress), tried

to create a national-oriented workers' movement, the "*Nationalsoziale Verein*" (National-Social Association). Naumann joined the Left Liberals in 1903, after the "Nationalsoziale Verein" was unsuccessful in two national elections. In 1907, he was elected for the first time to the German "Reichstag". In the years leading up to 1914, he campaigned strongly for cooperation between liberals and [social democrats](#). He believed this would increase the political influence of the German middle classes; push back the power of agrarian interests, as represented by the conservative and catholic parties; and, in the long run, transform the "*Kaiserreich*" and Prussia into real constitutional monarchies. As a result, Naumann became the most well-known spokesman of German liberalism, although his political project was subject to vigorous debate within his own political camp.

2. During the War

After the outbreak of war, Naumann supported the approach of Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#), his idea of a "*Burgfrieden*" (internal truce) and his war policy. Accordingly, Naumann was among the ninety-three signatories of the "*Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*" (Manifesto of the 93) in October 1914. In foreign policy, he hoped, as he had done before the war, for an accommodation with [France](#). He quickly realized that there was no chance of a German victory; in his eyes the war would, at best, end in a draw. Therefore, he changed his view on German foreign policy. He became convinced that [Germany's](#) future as a great power did not lie in creating an overseas [empire](#), but rather in becoming a continental power. He developed his idea of "*Mitteleuropa*" against this background. He planned to convert the German-Austrian alliance into a federation of the central European states, which would be led by Germany. The other member states and nations would, however, be offered some rights of co-determination. Naumann's book "*Mitteleuropa*", published in October 1915, became a bestseller, but had no influence on official policy in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest. It also did not address the political infighting caused by debate over [German war aims](#), although Naumann tried to adapt his concept to the developments of the war. Hence, from 1917 onwards, he promoted cooperation between the Left Liberals, the moderate Social Democrats and the previously antagonized Catholic Center Party in the Reichstag, and backed their attempts to achieve a "*Verständigungsfrieden*" (negotiated peace) and the democratization of the *Kaiserreich*. He was also among the first to understand the importance of political education in a democratic society.

3. After the Revolution

When a democratic constitution was established in October 1918, Naumann believed that he had achieved many of his political goals, but he accepted the new republic immediately after the fall of the monarchy. He was a member of the "Nationalversammlung" (National Assembly) in Weimar, where he resolutely opposed the [Treaty of Versailles](#), and was elected as chairman of the newly-formed left liberal German Democratic Party five weeks before he died.

Section Editor: [Christoph Nübel](#)

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