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Kristian Kragelund
Sturm und Drang

09.03-10.24.2026

The phrase 'Sturm und Drang' (usually translated as 'storm and stress') began life as the title of a five-act play by German writer Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, which premiered in Leipzig in April 1777 – a romantic drama set against the backdrop of the American Revolution. Despite the play receiving little attention, its name fast became the catchphrase for a whole cultural movement happening in Germany at the time. Inspired by their period's revolutionary zeal, a generation of writers, artists and composers – including Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Caspar Wolf and Joseph Haydn – rejected the order and rationality of the dominant Enlightenment culture.

Anticipating many aspects of Romanticism, they prized individual freedom, conveyed extreme emotional states and sought to shock their audience. Their symphonies were in minor keys, full of unpredictable melodies and dramatic tempo changes, their paintings of storms and glaciers revealed the destructive power of the natural world, and the plots of their novels were driven by the psychic vicissitudes of tormented, often lonely and always male, protagonists. The movement was an assertion of German culture against French classicism, of the Volk against the feudal overlords, as well as an expression of nascent middle class values. Its most famous product was Goethe's 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, about a sensitive young artist who is rejected by the woman he loves and eventually kills himself.

For almost a century the words 'Sturm und Drang' remained firmly attached to this short-lived if influential movement. Then, in 1857, they were introduced to a wider English audience by Charles Kingsley, the well-known writer and clergyman, in his novel *Two Years Ago*. Kingsley was a founding advocate of the 'Muscular Christianity' movement that encouraged fitness, discipline, social duty and patriotism. He used the phrase 'Sturm und Drang' in his novel to sum up everything he despised, mocking Elsie Vavasour, his caricature of an overemotional and self-absorbed artist.

Applying this foreign historical reference to a contemporary English context, Kingsley freed the term from its original meaning. It was only truly popularised, though, in the early twentieth century after the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall included it in his pioneering studies of adolescence. Having heard of the late-eighteenth-century literary movement while working in Berlin and Leipzig as a young man, Hall felt 'Sturm und Drang' perfectly encapsulated the difficulties of teenagerhood as he perceived them: steep mood swings, extreme uncontrolled behaviour and fraught parental relations.

Today, among journalists and cultural commentators, especially in the US, 'Sturm und Drang' is used all the time to describe chaos or upheaval in any situation. In October last year, David Wallace Wells bemoaned 'all the Sturm und Drang of Trump's policies' in *The New York Times*. During an interview at San Diego Comic Con on the forthcoming *Avengers* film, director Joe Russo said 'there's a lot of Sturm und Drang and anger inside of' Doctor Doom. And in May's *Artforum*, Harmon Siegel described art critics in the 1960s filling 'the void' left by Greenberg and Rosenberg 'with the sound of Sturm und Drang'. Storm and stress are ever-present in the world of American letters.

In the last five years, Kristian Kragelund has been scouring online forums and archives, finding strange messages that DIY hackers have hidden within their computer virus code: confessional notes and violent diatribes, cries for help and cryptic poems never

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intended to be read. These coders are generally ‘lone wolves’, operating on their own and without wider objectives beyond causing random disruption. Mostly young white men, the sorrowful Werthers of our digital age, they are often associated with incel and alt-right subcultures. One of the more memorable notes Kragelund has found – nestled within a piece of code designed to trigger a piercing alarm before irreversibly destroying its host machine – reads simply, ‘strm und drang’.

Text by Michael Kurtz