

Five Germanys I have known

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This is an account of my experiences, personal and professional, of five different German regimes in the last century. I was born in Breslau in 1926 — so the first Germany I knew was the Weimar Republic — and lived under National Socialism until 1938 when I emigrated to the United States, where, by 1951, I was teaching German History. I travelled to the Federal Republic for the first time in 1950 and taught at the Free University in Berlin. I worked in the archives of the German Democratic Republic in 1961 and 1962 and participated in the first German historiographical controversy in 1964 and then lectured extensively in the fifth, unified Germany. This lecture was written and delivered at NIAS, Wassenaar, the Netherlands, in 1998 and it reflects on, and exemplifies, the relation between private memory and public history. The German past, in all its great and catastrophic complexity, is still present in German political and intellectual life and hence the work of the historian has a potential political and pedagogical impact. My basic approach to German history emerges in this essay, as it does even more pointedly in the lectures I give in Germany itself.

Before beginning my non-scholarly account, a brief explanation is in order. I am about to offer you a melange of memories and impressions, gathered over a long life that seems remarkably short, together with historical reflections: an unorthodox genre, if a genre at all. Some of the great historians of the mid-nineteenth century and later thought history was a science and, in their austere ethos, they thought, in the words of Fustel de Coulanges, that the historian should expunge the self. It is ‘not I who speak, but history which speaks through me’. There have been endless debates on the nature of history; it has been left to devotees of the post-modern scene to deny that there is such a thing as truth in history, to insist that all historical work is subjective, a conspiracy of meaning between author and reader.

I hold to the grand examples set by the Dutch historians, Pieter Geyl and Johan Huizinga — very different one from the other, but both very much aware that

historical writing combines art and science — that, in my own simple terms, we need to search the traces of the past, the facts of the past, but that these facts are dumb, and they acquire meaning through our imagination and analysis. In short, between the old austere tradition of denying the self and the new mode of revelling in subjectivity, I am a centrist. The ‘I’ in history is inextinguishable but needs to be disciplined. Put yet again differently, I shall mix memory and history, those distant cousins.

Let me remind you of the startling fact that, in the last century, there have been six Germanys, six radically different political regimes, different political cultures and styles, and with six different borders: Imperial Germany before 1918, the Weimar Republic, the Germany of National Socialism, then an interval of four years from 1945 to 1949, when the country as a political entity had vanished, the Federal Republic, the German Democratic Republic, and finally unified Germany. Given that kind of compressed violent turbulence, the word ‘finally’ may be out of place. I have had some acquaintance with five of these Germanys (the word ‘known’ is a frivolous literary formulation).

Imperial Germany, Bismarck’s creation, which lasted for 43 years, was a strange mixture of dynamic modernism in industrial growth, science, technology and scholarship on the one hand, and pre- or anti-modern politics, semi-feudal pretension and presumption on the other. As was true of the other great nations of Europe, its national, even nationalist, sentiments coexisted with an internationalist outlook. Men such as Hendrik Antoon Lorentz of Leiden were revered among German scientists, as was Niels Bohr decades later. Until his early admirable break with National Socialism, Huizinga was a major presence in Germany. The Great War, that first catastrophe of the century from which most other catastrophes followed, intensified national and class conflicts. In the years of the Weimar Republic, from 1919 to 1933, German society was at war with itself, and yet, in the shadow of death, a modern, emancipatory culture emerged — with the place of women, for example, significantly altered, at least in urban settings. National Socialism, Germany’s most popular regime until circa 1941, was probably the most criminal and most popular tyranny of our century. With astounding speed, the Third Reich conquered most of continental Europe and corrupted — as we are now told in often decontextualized fashion — most of the corruptible elements in neutral countries. Mastery was short and brutal; after Germany’s total defeat, the master became the pariah of Europe. Into a country in ruins then came some ten million Germans who were expelled from Poland and Czechoslovakia; there was no ‘hour zero’, no fundamental new beginning, there was chaos, an inability to mourn, an all-consuming inclination for self-pity. The cold war had its European focus in what had been Germany; by 1949, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic were established, the first under the beneficent dominance of the United States, the second under the exploitative,

repressive dominance of the Soviet Union. The reunified Germany of 1990 is much freer of earlier constraints, no longer burdened by the former dependence on American and Allied protection because of the precarious status of West Berlin. Reunified Berlin has become the capital of Europe's greatest power, the capital of a country in search of a new identity, a new mission, a new understanding of its multiple pasts.

Despite all these radical breaks, there are continuities as well as discontinuities, which are often consonant with changes in Europe as a whole. Germany has returned to its earlier federal character, to being a country with distinct *Länder*, some still with their own dialect and even style. Its political parties and educational institutions have strong roots in the past; it is still a country with a work ethos, even if it is attenuated, with a strong desire for the comforts of law and order, with occasional eruptions of violence — in the 1970s on the left, and in recent years on the right. It is still a country that has a special word for civic virtue: *Zivilcourage* — a word, but rarely the practice. Germany continues to be uneasy about those of its citizens who resisted tyranny, whether the unsuccessful resisters to Hitler or the successful revolutionaries in East Germany. Germans, I think, unconsciously, denigrate these last by calling what happened in 1989 *Die Wende*, a neutral term, a turn on the road, hardly a term that conjures up the memory of hundreds of thousands of East Germans on the streets in the fall of 1989. Among the discontinuities, I would also mention the decline of anti-Western attitudes, the attenuation of what had once been a strong religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, and profound changes in the life of families and the position of women. All of this is in a much more secular society, in a rapidly ageing society. And last but hardly least, Germany is marked by a much weakened, uncertain nationalism, overlain by a genuine if also uncertain commitment to being part of Europe.

The first Germany I knew was that of the Weimar Republic. I was born in 1926 — a safe eight years after the Great War — in Breslau, into the sheltered life of a professional family. My father, two grandfathers, and four great-grandfathers were physicians. My mother, with a doctorate in physics, founded her own Kindergarten and developed a modified version of Montessori-type ways of teaching. At home, there was a certain informal decorum, a special reverence for books, the expectation of intense work, with the great adventure of the annual vacation at the sea or in the mountains. I believe that, from an early age, I knew about the Great War. My father had volunteered in 1914, ended up as a lieutenant with the Iron Cross, first class and afterwards suffered intermittent insomnia and occasional outbursts of anger, which my mother explained away as being the product of the war. He himself rarely talked of the war, although I was no doubt impressed by the pictures of him, in 1917–18, in observation balloons.

However, the war also had an everyday presence on the streets: the appearance

of the grotesquely mutilated, the disfigured with half their faces shot away, the maimed with stumps for legs or missing arms, invalids with their frightening prostheses and their primitive means of locomotion — wheelchairs hand-propelled by the invalids themselves. I remember the blind with their yellow armbands. Although my father hardly ever spoke about the war, at some early point I learned that he loathed war; that, translated into adult or historical language, he had turned from his earlier patriotism to being a Social Democrat with pacifist inclinations and a strong distaste for the old or the new militarism. I do remember my first political impressions, I suppose because they spoke of danger, because I had picked up the adults' fears. I remember seeing my first SA man, in the summer of 1931, selling Nazi papers at a North Sea resort and, more clearly, my parents listening with Social Democratic friends to radio broadcasts of the disastrous election results of July 1932. There were endless marches of Nazis and other semi-military groups. I remember seeing with admiration the emblem of the three arrows of the Iron Front, that militant organization of supporters of the Republic, on a friend's bicycle. I remember clearly that, sometime in the autumn of 1932, a bomb was thrown into the living room of a friend and patient of my father. His name was Ernst Eckstein, the fiery local leader of a new party, the SAP, a radical left-wing party that hoped to forge a new union of workers won from Socialist and Communist ranks. Decades later I talked to Willy Brandt about Eckstein, whom he admired. There was much that was not talked about in the family. I doubt that I knew where children came from, but I did know who threw bombs. I do remember the air of violence in the winter of 1932.

I remember the end of that first Germany, of Weimar. I had also heard tales of the time when the family lost all its money — translated into adult language, the Great Inflation. And I also remember a new colony of houses, bright, open with a large public swimming pool; in retrospect, I know it as an example of the best of public housing that Weimar had inaugurated. A grateful patient gave my father three small tables, with shiny chrome legs and polished black wooden tops that could be stored together in the manner of Russian dolls, one inside the other. Much later I realized they were model designs of the early Bauhaus. Decades later, I studied the history of Weimar and students of mine wrote their dissertations on the subject. At NIAS I wrote a lecture on 'Death in Weimar', on how death hung over that short period, making its achievements all the more remarkable.

The second Germany I can date quite precisely: one day in the winter of 1933 (in retrospect, the date of course was January 30), on my way home from school I heard newspaper hawkers announcing a special edition with the banner headline '*Hitler appointed Chancellor*', I bought a copy and delivered it to my parents. I knew it was bad news; how terrible became clear within days and weeks. I also remember that, on that afternoon, I watched a parade of Communists, men,

women, and children, chanting 'Hunger, Hunger'. It was the last such demonstration I saw. Life changed abruptly, and the outside world intruded in often terrifying ways; and only at home, within the family, could one talk freely, although my no doubt solicitous mother sought to shield me from some of the news.

However, that Ernst Eckstein had been arrested and, a few days later, was found dead in his prison cell could not be kept from me. All at once, fear and grief settled in. Decades later I would read William James's phrase 'The imagination of disaster'; I think I began to live with that kind of imagination quite early.

A few weeks later, the 'Aryan' Social Democratic Governor of the Province of Lower Silesia, Hermann Lüdemann, another friend and patient of my father, was carted through the streets of Breslau on his way to a concentration camp; pictures of Lüdemann in a concentration camp appeared in the newspapers. And memories of that incident led me to say, decades later, that only village idiots could have been unaware of the existence of these camps. The camps were meant to intimidate and the first victims were Hitler's political enemies, Aryans and Jews alike. Several other political friends disappeared.

I was barely seven when all this happened; it was then that I first learned that my family, immediate and extended, who had always so normally, so cheerfully celebrated Christmas and Easter were, in the eyes of the new regime, non-Aryan. That is, my grandparents were Jewish; the paternal ones had converted to Lutheranism: my parents, my sister and I had been baptised at birth but, in the eyes of the regime and in my own, I was a full-blooded non-Aryan. The early measures against Jews and non-Aryans began to affect our lives. My father's position as Professor of Medicine became untenable, although he could keep his private practice. Relatives who were civil servants lost their positions altogether and began to emigrate. Emigration became the subject of all-consuming speculation.

In September 1933, my parents went to Paris, my father to work at the Hôtel Dieu, that ancient Paris hospital, in hopes of being able to practice in France. My sister (six years older than myself) and I were left in the care of our grandmother. I had the wit to become seriously ill. My father returned, treated me and, as a reward for illness, we children were also taken to Paris. It must have been in early November 1933. We stayed with my father's sister in Neuilly, a lovely Paris suburb. An overly cautious father ordered me to stay at home most of the time until, at the end of my convalescence, he took me to the great sights of Paris, the Arc de Triomphe and Napoleon's tomb included. I was given a children's book, *Le Grand Napoleon pour les petits enfants*, and I relived the Napoleonic legend. However, the French doctors who had encouraged my father to work at the Hôtel Dieu, after which he would get a licence to practice, failed to deliver. Shortly after the Stavisky riots in Paris in early February 1934, which I remember, and

seemingly robbed of all opportunities for founding a new existence, my parents saw no alternative but to return to Breslau, where my father resumed his practice. I was very, very sad and came home with a case of Francophilia, a cheerful affliction. No sooner were we home than new negotiations for emigration began: clinical positions in Tunis, Ankara, Teheran, a sanatorium in Liechtenstein, all these were close prospects but, in the end, they all came to nought.

My father's practice included Jews and non-Jews. One incident I remember vividly. Frau von Roebern, an old patient of my father's, became ill with unbearable headaches, a brain tumour was diagnosed. Only an operation could save her from a gruesome death, and only one surgeon was willing to risk so delicate an operation. He happened to be Jewish. Frau von Roebern's son-in-law inquired whether the operation and that particular surgeon were really necessary; he was an SS officer, appearing of course in mufti. A few days later, my father wanted me to visit the lady after her surgery, her head covered with bandages, with me trying to imagine what it meant to open a skull. I was supposed to cheer her up, but I think she left me with a case of incipient worry about the fragility of life.

In 1936, I was enrolled in a public gymnasium (grammar school), on the other side of town, because it was assumed that the director was a decent man who would look after his outcast charges. Intensely unpleasant years followed. I remember two teachers vividly, the severe Latin teacher, whose forceful slaps in the face (*Ohrfeigen*) were renowned in the school. He slapped non-rationally, non-politically and he showed me no hostility, on the contrary, I could trust him. My parents explained that he had been a German nationalist long before the Nazis came to power. He had no use for them and little to fear from them. Herr Müth, the mathematics teacher, a former quasi-democrat, was different, he delighted in giving arithmetical problems involving Jews, preferably cheating or emigrating Jews. At least I learned Latin and Greek in preparation for emigration.

My fellow students were rough, as I remember, with most of them in the Hitler Youth. How could I not see that they were thrilled by their after-school uniforms, by their marches and flags, by all that I later came to understand had been one vast pageantry of politics. The unceasing propaganda, the drama of speeches and rallies, the order in the streets, Hitler's dramatic announcements of foreign triumphs (such as the day he announced that German troops were entering the demilitarized Rhineland even as he was speaking), I do not think any of this was lost on my fellow students. Years later I gave a lecture in Germany on 'National Socialism as Temptation' and cheerfully acknowledged that I was saved from that temptation by being a full-blooded non-Aryan. Two older boys in school, the Bunzel brothers, who were sons of a Protestant pastor, a member of the Confessional Church, kept an eye out for me during the daily recess periods in the schoolyard when I had to anticipate physical unpleasantness. How well I

remember my last day in that school, in July 1938, when I had to say goodbye to the director, even as classmates were celebrating the departure of the last Jew. He said sanctimoniously that he hoped I knew he had always tried to help me. I said, no, I had not noticed, and I left.

I make light of the special status of the non-Aryan, although actually it made life particularly hard. Nonetheless, in 1935, my sister was confirmed, to my sneering disbelief. Her pastor was a decent man, three or four times imprisoned by the Nazis. And we still celebrated Christmas. As my mother and sister decorated the tree, my father took me into his study and read Heine to me, his ironic poems about things German, his great poems about Napoleon. For Christmas 1936 we were given a radio (you rented them before for special occasions), and that night I stayed up late and, at 9 pm, listened to Radio Strasbourg and, at midnight, to Radio Moscow in German, beginning with the Internationale and 'Proletarians of the world, unite'. That was one temptation I was not entirely spared: I mean the simple faith, reinforced by the aftermath of the Reichstag fire and the Spanish Civil War, that the Communists were the sworn, tough enemies of the Nazis. In August 1939, with the Hitler–Stalin pact, I lost that illusion and subsequently was spared many a temptation.

No need to detail the harshness of the time, the constant fear, the constant stream of bad news, the insulation of a warm home, the mounting unease. But there was one reward for all the hardships and deprivations, for the sense of being an outcast before you knew the word. That reward included the annual vacation, that first non-vacation stay in Paris, the trips to the nearby Czech mountains and two visits to Prague, where I could read a German press that was free. Later trips were to Switzerland, to the North Sea in Denmark and, in 1937, a fortnight in Noordwijk, always together with friends who were already in exile. Those were glorious escapes, the ordinary joys of vacation sublimely heightened by a sense of freedom. From the confines of Nazi Germany I came to love Europe, dare I say that I was a European *avant la lettre*?

In recalling incidents and the atmosphere of that second Germany, I have to ask: are these truly my own memories, relatively untouched by later additions? I believe they are my own, and I see them confirmed in letters and pictures of the time. In asking myself the question, I was reminded of what Goethe in *Poetry and Truth* wrote about his memories, as a six-year-old, of the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755. 'Perhaps the demon of horror had never before spread its spell so quickly and so powerfully across the earth.' I do remember the demon of horror that spread over Germany, I remember the beginning of it, the mere intimation of the full horror that was yet to come, from which my immediate family and I were saved. After so many failed efforts to find a position in Europe or in a world more or less modelled after Europe, my parents finally decided to emigrate to the United States, a land that at the time seemed very distant. There was a seemingly endless

quest for the necessary papers, the special documents and financial guarantees you needed for an immigration visa to the United States, the papers you needed to leave Germany. 1938 was the year of a renewed radicalization of the Nazi regime, an ever-tightening noose. In February, while on a brief holiday in Czechoslovakia, I made my own plans: I would go to friends in Prague, enrol in the French lycée there. My plan may have given my parents a further push but, in any case, we cleared the obstacles. I remember the day that we dropped my father at the Gestapo for the necessary papers. Would he return, or not?

We received our American visas in mid-August and booked passage on the SS *Statendam*, sailing from Rotterdam on 1 October, with therefore plenty of time for the final removal. And then one telling incident occurred. One late evening in mid-September, the doorbell rang, I opened it, and it was Major von Zerboni, retired, husband of an old patient of my father, who demanded to see my father at once. An unprecedented, sudden visit. He had come to tell my father that while he had always counselled him against emigration, that Hitler would pass and his wife needed my father's care, now he had come to say that his friends from the active service, officers in Hitler's army, had told him that Hitler was determined to go to war over Czechoslovakia. In the case of war, he continued, my father would be drafted as a doctor in the army, hence we should leave as quickly as possible.

Think of the multiple improbabilities, the German major comes to his Jewish doctor to warn him about a war into which he might be drafted. I say 'Jewish' doctor because the term *non-Aryan* I think of as officially imposed nonsense. In any case, my father and I left Breslau the next night and waited in Berlin for my mother and sister — Berlin being an easier place to depart from than Breslau. We stayed with my father's older sister and her husband, who later perished in Auschwitz. We left Berlin on 24 September, the airport ringed with anti-aircraft guns; we flew to Amsterdam, my first stop in freedom, and left Rotterdam as scheduled. In all my unordered memorabilia, I have found a postcard of the *Statendam*, with my notation of the date of departure and arrival.

For me, departure was an unambiguous joy. I still remember the tears of my father as the train left Breslau. I felt nothing but wondrous relief, although I can understand his momentary regret. My own undeserved good fortune can be summed up easily, we left Germany six weeks before the horror of the so-called *Kristallnacht*, the true beginning of organized bestiality, the night when the stormtroopers came looking for my father at the home of Christian patients. We arrived in the United States six weeks after the worst hurricane in centuries had struck the East Coast and left hundreds of people dead. We had escaped the terrors of man's inhumanity and the terrors of nature.

Let me insert some retrospective remarks. The character of Nazi policies and of German Jews has been the subject of renewed controversy. Until sometime in

1941, Nazi policy was one of extrusion of Jews from Germany, extrusion under ever more humiliating circumstances, under ever-greater terror, extrusion, but not extermination. German Jews, a community divided within itself, had to confront anguished uncertainties: when to leave, where to go. The more common the wish to emigrate, the harder it became to find a country to receive them. And yet, later, the fate of Jews in occupied Europe was infinitely, unspeakably worse. In the Western world, including in the United States, important elements in society harboured much sympathy for Hitler and his achievements, and much understanding for his anti-Semitism. No country was free of what might loosely be called the fascist bacillus, any more than any of us today are safely immune from Le Penisme or Haiderism.

My first 12 years I lived in Europe, the next 12 years in the United States: at the time, at least for me, it was an enchanted country, with a great democratic tradition and embattled, magnificent leadership. I did not know the word 'charisma' then, but Franklin Roosevelt — and his wife, Eleanor, whom I once met — had charisma. The governor of New York at the time was Herbert Lehmann, son of an old German–American Jewish family, and the incomparable mayor of New York was Fiorello LaGuardia, half-Italian, half-Jewish, and all-American. The United States, only gradually emerging from the Great Depression, from a collapse of capitalism that present-day idolaters of the free market seem to have forgotten, was still merely a continental power. Its rise to world power has had many costs and it has had its own experiences in domestic adversity and illiberality. But changing America is not my subject here.

I did not know the non-existent Germany of 1945–49, with Allied occupation zones, the pariah in Europe, more object than subject of history. The division of Germany, by the way, was not a foregone conclusion. Allied policy in Germany consisted at first of improvisations. I was no freer than others of hatred for what Germans had done, but it was in that immediate postwar period that the personal and the professional came together in my life. In my college years I abandoned the premedical studies I had begun, in conformity with family tradition. I owe my turn to history to a few excellent teachers and to the historic drama I had witnessed. Actually a series of career coincidences led me to a study of German history, of which I now assert there is no such thing. German history has to be seen in its European and, at some points, in its global context. Consciously and unconsciously, I came to wrestle with the question that so many of my generation everywhere came to wrestle with: how was it possible, how could a civilized people have fallen to such demonic depths?

In 1950 I returned to Europe. I suppose some kind of nostalgic affection brought me back to England, France and Switzerland. And some suspicious, angry wonderment at what had just been proclaimed as the Federal Republic, to Munich, where I needed to do research for my dissertation, which dealt with the

intellectual-cultural origins of National Socialism. The physical destruction was visible, the mental devastation discernible, the self-pity pervasive. Hardly anyone had been a Nazi, hardly anyone had escaped some personal trauma. It was the time when one wit remarked, 'Poor Hitler, he must have been all alone, no one to follow him'. In Munich, I met the splendid liberal Catholic historian Franz Schnabel, whom the Nazis had removed from an earlier position, and who was now Professor of Modern History at the university. He said to me: 'It took two revolutions and two world wars for me to get a regular appointment at a German university'. And I thought that it had taken that much and more to establish a democratic system that still seemed exceedingly fragile and which was very much dependent on American help and tutelage. I returned in the summer of 1954 to teach at the Free University of Berlin; in retrospect, a somewhat presumptuous effort at teaching students their own history. I still remember the not so hidden anti-Americanism, the complaint that the Western Allies were responsible for Germany's losses in the East, that Yalta had divided Europe, and my retort that Yalta had had to ratify what Hitler and his regime had begun. Who, after all, had brought the Russians to the centre of Europe? And did I not have instinctive admiration for the grandiose war monuments that the Soviets had erected in East Berlin? But the great emotional experience came unexpectedly on the 20th of July 1954, the day that the tenth anniversary of the failed coup against Hitler was being commemorated. I heard Theodor Heuss in the morning, and in the afternoon I managed to smuggle myself into the memorial ceremony in the small courtyard of the Bendlerstrasse, the army headquarters, where so many of the conspirators had been shot. There I saw the widows and children of men who had risked their lives to end the horror. At the time, I felt that their cause may not have been our own, but that their heroism, their decency was beyond all doubt. I wrote at the time that the faces of the survivors, women, mostly, of an old elite that had found a noble end to its ambiguous historic role, touched me, purged me of some of the facile judgements of the past. And I also wrote that the real defeat of the conspirators lay not in the accidental survival of Hitler, but in the fact that their own people remained so reluctant to acknowledge their sacrifice. It was my first sense that most Germans, given I suppose the passivity of so many of them, found it hard to honour resisters. That I, who as a child had not been able to resist, have had a life-long admiration for the often quiet resisters, the righteous ones in darkest times, I find unsurprising. For decades to come I was fortunate in meeting, perhaps in seeking out, resisters.

The need to resist, or rather, to dissent, to reject conformity is not restricted to dictatorial regimes. The early 1950s were not an easy time in the United States. Senator McCarthy had begun his campaign to denounce and purge Americans who could in any way be accused of 'red' sympathies, let alone of Communist loyalties. McCarthyism invaded every sphere of American society, government, academic and cultural life. McCarthy exploited, for his own purposes, a widespread

American paranoia about the Communist danger, made more immediate by the revelation of actual espionage and infiltration. The 'red threat' was an example of a deep-rooted American suspicion of conspiracies, foreign or domestic, a particularly malevolent example of what a great American historian, Richard Hofstadter, has called 'the paranoid style in American politics'. Some of my friends saw, in McCarthy, America's Hitler, in President Eisenhower, America's Hindenburg, and in the entire condition of the country a kind of incipient Weimar syndrome. That kind of facile analogy I thought misleading, even dangerous, for it could encourage passivity and fatalism. I mention it here to show that German has become the language of political crisis. In time, the resistance to McCarthy grew, and he contributed greatly to his own downfall. America has had the good fortune, so far, in that our right-wing demagogues have usually succumbed to self-destruction. However, it is not a fortune that one can count on, not in America, not elsewhere.

I mention McCarthyism to suggest that no country is completely safe from political unreason, but some countries have stronger habits of resistance than others. I mention it also to suggest that, perhaps, I gradually acquired something like a bifocal view, although others might call it impaired vision. I tend to see things German with American eyes, and things American with German eyes.

My involvement with my third Germany, with the Federal Republic, grew deeper, partly by accident, partly for reasons that I have come to understand only retrospectively. The German past was something that was now my professional interest, charged with the intensity of personal experience. And so it came that I was involved in the first great German '*Historikerstreit*', occasioned by Fritz Fischer's book in 1962. Fischer had reopened the question of German responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War. He had discovered new evidence of extravagant German war aims as early as 1914, and he argued that German leaders were determined to win the status of a world power, to replace the Pax Britannica that had given Europe 100 years of peace. The old guard of German historians was outraged. The old guard had set itself the task of retaining, in some kind of purity, as much of German history as possible; to deny that National Socialism was somehow embedded in German history, and to assert rather that National Socialism was an unfortunate accident and that blame for it was to be put variously on Versailles, on the Bolsheviks, on the Depression, and on the dangers of a mass society. As one German historian in 1945 wrote to his son, one had to defend the German past against 'Jewish-democratic' calumnies.

A meeting of the German Historical Society in Berlin in 1964 had Fischer's book on its agenda, and the heavy guns of the established guild were prepared to make a final onslaught on Fischer, who had, so the saying went, fouled the collective nest. Jacques Droz, a French historian, and I were invited to participate in the session, attended by about 1000 students. The atmosphere was more like

a political rally than an academic debate. Droz and I defended the book, while acknowledging its shortcomings, and I attacked the then still fashionable notion that the Great War *and* National Socialism had been some sort of entrepreneurial accidents (*Betriebsunfälle*). I asked: 'Could one in fact have had a series of such accidents without having to conclude that something was wrong with the enterprise itself?' I was taken aback by the excessive enthusiasm of the audience, as were the self-appointed guardians of the German past, who after the debate refused to shake my hand. Fischer was largely vindicated and by now his views of German policies in the Great War have become conventional wisdom. In the wake of the debate, a new and critical generation of German historians began their impressive work at reconstructing the German past, at first, I would say, largely along liberal-democratic lines.

In the last few years, in most Western countries, radical revisions have been made in the portrayal of the national past. History should be an endless debate, but my point here is simply that, for obvious reasons, the German past remains of special relevance to German culture and politics today. By professional commitment and personal inclination I became a distant participant in the revisionist work of German historians. Some of us came to emphasize that Germany's political development, beginning in the late 18th century, had been different from its Western neighbours. One of my earliest pieces dealt with 'The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German'. Since then this emphasis has come to be categorized as the assumption of a German *Sonderweg* — now much denounced, especially by young British historians, as a myth, as a deliberate misreading of both German and Western history. What puzzles me in this angry revision of the revisers is that the great contemporaries of the pre-1914 period, both German and non-German, worried about Germany's failure to adjust its political structure to its modern, industrial society — here I think of Max Weber, say, or Thorsten Veblen in America. By now, other issues have generated great controversies: a flawed and ahistorical work, such as Daniel Goldhagen's book on *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, has divided the critical historical profession in every country from a large public that has been eagerly buying, perhaps even reading it. It is a book with the most simplistic answers to the deepest moral-historical questions. I can only repeat: the German past and present are deeply intertwined, the field is very much alive, German politics, especially in an election year, are full of allusions to the past. The German past remains explosive and exploitable.

Friends and colleagues in the Federal Republic who were struggling to understand the German past correctly in order to strengthen the new liberal-democratic order eased my path to my Third Germany. The renewal of contacts was not easy. There must have been some reason, beyond professional convenience, why I spent my first three sabbaticals not in Germany but in Paris,

Oxford and at NIAS — with frequent forays into Germany of course. But gradually, and without clear self-awareness, I came to take an occasional part in German debates. I watched the German scene: I thought that the election of Willy Brandt, the former resister who had actually borne arms against the National-Socialist regime, marked the final defeat of Hitler. I admired Brandt and Helmut Schmidt and generally came to see that the Bonn Republic had witnessed not only the much-touted economic miracle, but a political miracle as well. The emergence of capable democratic politicians, such as Ernst Reuter, Theodor Heuss, and many others, supplying for the first time effective, committed leadership. That I thought the German–American relationship particularly important is obvious; a command at once of political reason and personal preference. I also happened to see the dramatic moments of the Franco- — German reconciliation. The remarkable trip that deGaulle made in 1962 to various German cities, his speeches (in all their majestic ambiguity) welcoming the Germans, that valiant people, to the European community.

I wish I had time to speak of 1968, a year that brought us much grief. I am thinking of the assassinations in the United States of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, of the Soviet tanks that crushed the Prague Spring, of the worldwide student revolt, with which I had my own direct experiences. In Germany, the events of 1968 marked a more profound caesura than they did elsewhere. The student movement had much deeper sources than opposition to the Vietnam war, horrible as that war was. It had utopian hopes and it gradually embraced violent means. I remember well-meaning observers lauding the ‘idealism’ of students who resorted to illegal methods. What troubled me the most was that German students began to call their opponents ‘*Scheissliberale*’, which made me think that German liberalism was particularly fragile, having so often been attacked from the right and the left. As for the putative idealism of those radical and sometimes violent students, encouraged by their older gurus, I thought of the words of President Lowell of Harvard: ‘I don’t mind idealists, it is the unprincipled idealists I mind’. Much earlier I had written about the *Vulgaridealismus* of the German right before 1914. I did not think that I would ever see a different type of so-called idealism mixed with *Vulgärmarxismus*. There were, there often are, reasons to worry about the vagaries of the German spirit intruding into German politics.

My concern for West German democracy was no doubt fortified by my early encounters with my fourth Germany. My excursions into the German Democratic Republic began while I was teaching at the Free University in Berlin in 1954. Crossing into East Berlin then reminded me of the earlier dictatorship, the ever-present uniforms, banners, posters, all the trappings of an organized tyranny, the sense of being shadowed. In short, I felt the similarities between the two regimes, which mocked the constantly reiterated insistence that the DDR was

Germany's only legitimate anti-fascist state. My real opportunity came in 1961 and 1962 when, with the help of French Communist historians, I was able to spend several weeks in the archives of East Germany, perhaps as the first American to spend such time in desolate Merseburg and shabby Potsdam. The archives were essential for my work on Bismarck's banker. I spent the rest of the time trying to understand this different Germany, so backward, so much less modern, so much less Americanized than West Germany, and with such extravagant promises of a great egalitarian future. Early on I noticed the discreet distance that local Protestant churches kept from the regime. Above all, I noticed the oppositional stance of many young archivists I met, who had chosen the profession of archivist rather than that of historian in order to escape the most stringent Marxist–Leninist indoctrination. I remember my last evening in Merseburg in 1962, the year after the great 'anti-fascist wall' had been built. Five young archivists came to have a beer with me at the Walter-Ulbricht Gästehaus where I had been quartered on my second trip. They began to make anti-regime remarks, with officers of the People's Army at nearby tables. I suggested we take a walk, but they continued their political commentaries. I finally said to one of them that I understood their criticism of the existing regime, but was there nothing about the *idea* of socialism that appealed to them? And in a non-subdued voice, the young archivist supplied this definition: 'Socialism is the rational and scientific effort of a united and heroic people to overcome difficulties that don't exist anywhere else'.

I suppose I ought to confess to a particular weakness for political jokes, and these were the stellar exports from East European countries of the time. But the East German regime was a brutal horror and material conditions were primitive, although a brief vacation from the consumer society in a land of austerity had its fleeting charm. I talked to true believers as well, people filled with the propaganda of the regime: their country was the solidly anti-fascist regime as against the aggressive, revisionist, still Nazified West German colony of American imperialism.

I left East Germany in 1962, full of impressions, full of disdain for a dishonest, inhuman regime, but with real sympathy for a people who had to bear the full cost of Hitler's war. West Germany had received Marshall Plan aid; East Germany saw the mass dismantling of its factories when these were shipped to the Soviet Union, land of their fraternal comrades. The regime boasted of its solidarity with the greatest socialist power, the USSR. Many people joked that the Russians were brothers, not friends; brothers you are stuck with, friends you choose! The regime was subservient to the USSR, and the people were forced to be subservient to the regime. But the official identity with the Soviet Union was a *Lebenslüge*, a lie that determines all of life, a German adaptation of a word from Ibsen's *Wild Duck* and a theme of most of his plays. The fact that for 40 years East Germans were taught that National Socialism was the inevitable product of monopoly capitalism gave

them, they thought, a clean bill of health. After all, they had rejected capitalism, hence were not responsible for the sins of National Socialism. Perhaps some of the left- and right-wing radicalism in the former East Germany today derives in part from the mendacious history that has been taught.

My West German friends and colleagues had little, if any, interest in what went on in the other Germany. They were concerned primarily with Western Europe and America, and I was struck by the tenuousness of German nationalism. Their ritualistic invocation of regret about the lost brothers and sisters seemed to cloak a massive indifference to East Germans. On an official level, attitudes began to change with *Ostpolitik* —and changed dramatically with Willy Brandt's visit to Erfurt. I watched when official and economic ties grew between the two German states in the 1980s, and when I spoke to the Bundestag in 1987 I referred to the citizens of the other Germany who, often under the protection of the church, were struggling for a better life, a free life.

I did not anticipate the self-liberation of Eastern Europe or the subsequent reunification of Germany. In the mid- to late-1980s I used to quote Helmut Schmidt, who thought that reunification would come, probably in the first decade of the new century. I thought this a safe prediction for late-middle-aged people to make. But in that glorious year 1989, hundreds of thousands of East Germans did go into the streets and demand a freer life, driven in part by the desire that filled all of Eastern Europe at the time — in Václav Havel's words, the desire 'to live in the truth'.

The fifth Germany I have known has now been in existence for nine years, and I have spent a great deal of time in it, as much as possible in the former East Germany. In 1990 I spoke of Germany's having a second chance now, meaning that Germany's first chance for success, before 1914, had been gambled away in the imperialist delusion of the Great War, but that now, Germany — once again the strongest country on the continent — had a new chance to pursue a peaceful, reasonable policy in the new concert of Europe. The precondition for such an achievement would have to be a genuine reunification, a genuine rebuilding of East Germany, whose economic backwardness we all had underestimated. I thought again of my view that the manner in which Germans treat Germans could serve as a foreshadowing of how they would behave to others. I thought that the economic difficulties of reunification would be great and, if anything, I too underestimated the difficulties. But I thought the psychological difficulties of reunification would be greater still. I was afraid that West Germans would treat East Germans with insufficient tact and empathy, would act as 'carpetbaggers', a term drawn from the aftermath of the American Civil War, when Northerners despoiled the defeated South.

The fifth Germany, like Bismarck's Germany, achieved formal unification, but initial euphoria soon gave way to new division and to disillusion on both sides

of what had once been a wall. Chancellor Kohl exploited with somnabulistic skill, a most favourable external political configuration, in order to achieve a unified Germany that would still be integrated into Europe and in NATO. But he did less well at home. For electoral reasons, he promised that the so-called new *Länder* would soon be transformed into blooming, flourishing landscapes and did little to warn his West German citizens of the costs of such a commitment. The costs, in fact, have been huge, and yet the inequalities between West and East Germany have deepened.

The new Berlin Republic will be neither Weimar nor Bonn. Not Weimar because, despite the recent resurgence of a radical right and despite the persistent vote in the new *Länder* for what many people assume is a post-Communist Party, despite the outrages against foreigners, democratic sentiments and institutions are now firmly entrenched in Germany. Put differently, unlike Weimar, any present anti-democratic groups in the new Germany will face determined resistance. But neither is the Berlin Republic going to be Bonn writ large. Bonn was dependent on its allies, on the United States, for the defence of West Berlin, for its own defence; the new Republic will be far more independent, although it may — I think it will — choose the closest possible ties to allies who by now may need it more than it needs them. The monstrous monumentality of some of Berlin's new architecture is likely to have some bearing on Germany's self-regard. National interests are more likely to be openly avowed and more forcefully pursued. Thomas Mann once distinguished between a Germanized Europe and a Europeanized Germany, hoping of course for the latter as I do.

And how will this fifth Germany deal with its multiple pasts? How will historians, politicians, and public intellectuals interpret Germany's astounding, terrifying history in the 20th century? How will the younger generation deal with the complicity of so many Germans with the terror of two dictatorships? In an increasingly ahistorical age, will the past become a mere grab-bag for polemics, with people using the past to fortify their position in the present? How strong, how effective will be the wish of many Germans to put the past behind them, to draw that famous final line under it, to assume the conditions of what they call a normal country? A normal country, with this kind of history?

Nietzsche said that Germans never cease asking, 'What is German?' The quest for a German identity is likely to grow more insistent and hence divisive and the reasoned judgements of Germany's many neighbours will be important. The new Germany will have to find its way in a Europe that, in the course of the 20th century, has lost much of its power in the world, not least because of German ambition in the first half of the century. And it must find its way in a Europe that is itself embarked on an uncertain course, embarked on an experiment in integration that may, at least initially, arouse nationalist misgivings.

Allow me two final remarks. There is one Germany that I have not mentioned

at all. I mean the language, corrupted as it was and is, but still sublime in Heine, in the best of Nietzsche, in Thomas Mann, a language that two dictatorships could not altogether demean. And finally, if I say I have been happy in Wassenaar, that is a tribute to NIAS and to the Netherlands, a country that exemplifies and has exemplified Europe at its best.

About the Author

Fritz Stern is University Professor Emeritus of Columbia University, where he has taught for 50 years. Professor Stern has published a wide variety of books on German history, including *The Politics of Cultural Despair: a Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (1961), *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (1972), *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (1977) and *Dreams and Delusions: the Drama of German History* (1987). He is the editor of *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present* (1956). His books have been translated into many foreign languages, including Dutch. His most recent work is *Einstein's German World: Essays in European History* (1999). It is a much-expanded version of *Verspielte Grösse. Essays zur deutschen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1996).