
BACKGROUND BOOKS

WEST GERMANY

"Germany is Hamlet!" exclaimed the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath in 1844.

Historian Gordon Craig, in **Germany, 1866-1945** (Oxford, 1978, cloth; 1980, paper), chose Freiligrath's remark as an epigraph to his survey of the "tragic story" of German history from Prince Otto von Bismarck's triumph over Austria to the fall of the Third Reich.

As Craig suggests, the same "pale cast of thought" that prevented Hamlet from avenging his father's death—the indecisiveness and confusion, the incapacity for self-criticism, the paralysis of will—dogged Germany as well. It hindered the pursuit of political freedom, and eventually it destroyed the country's unity and political culture.

In the view of many historians, Germany suffered because, unlike France, Britain, and the United States, her people dallied with but refused to embrace Western liberalism—the political legacy of the Enlightenment. In his densely written **The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition** (Univ. of Chicago, 1957, cloth; 1973, paper), Leonard Krieger probes the traditional German concept of the state. He finds that from the inception of the Holy Roman Empire, the loose confederation that made up "Germany" from the Middle Ages to 1806, the Germans considered political freedom a mere privilege that could be granted, or revoked, by the "prince."

Krieger notes that even as Englishman John Locke in the 17th century was defending individual rights

against the usurpations of government, German political theorist Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-94) was insisting that "the supreme sovereign can rightfully force citizens to all things which he judges to be of any advantage to the public good."

Hajo Holborn, in **A History of Modern Germany** (Knopf, 1964), agrees with Krieger. The notion of the absolute authority of the state, he argues, came to full bloom in Prussia under Frederick the Great (1712-86), who built his kingdom into a formidable European power. Frederick's absolutism—he methodically subordinated the rights of his subjects to the needs of the Army, bureaucracy, and nobility—carried over into Bismarck's Empire (1871-1918) and became its major flaw.

Historians have found other flaws in Bismarck's Germany. In **The Social Foundations of German Unification, 1858-1871**, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1969, cloth & paper), Theodore Hamerow describes the class divisions of the Second Reich, where wealth and nobility remained the monopoly of a privileged caste. In Prussia, Bismarck retained the old constitution of 1849 with its system of "three-class suffrage" that gave more parliamentary representation to the moneyed minority than to the lower-class majority.

George O. Kent considers Bismarck himself, in **Bismarck and His Times** (Southern Ill. Univ., 1978, cloth & paper). The Chancellor's bold personality, his diplomatic genius, and even his ruthlessness—he warned his compatriots that only "iron and blood" would unify Ger-

many—served him well as he took on foreign and domestic foes and forged a German empire.

But, as Kent reminds us, the conservative Prince had “some noticeable blind spots.” He never recognized the necessity of coming to terms with socialism, for example, whose adherents he oppressed, and whose cause he thereby furthered.

According to sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, in **Society and Democracy in Germany** (Doubleday, 1967, cloth; Norton, 1979, paper), Western-style liberalism remained out of Germany’s reach until the “social basis of authoritarian government” was destroyed. This occurred, ironically, as a result of Adolf Hitler’s revolution during the 1930s, which jarred the bulwarks of Bismarck’s order—the Junkers entrenched in the Army, bureaucracy, and judiciary—and swept away many of the social vestiges of the old German Empire.

The problem in Germany had always been, as Fritz Stern comments in **The Failure of Illiberalism** (Knopf, 1971, cloth; Univ. of Chicago, 1976, paper), that “revolution came from above,” as when, for example, Bismarck introduced unemployment insurance to forestall social unrest. Yet the stern munificence of Bismarck’s “State Socialism,” like political freedom, was subject to the ruler’s caprice.

“Reform” came from above in Nazi Germany as well, except that the changes brought on by mass mobilization and, eventually, total war were so devastating that most of the last class distinctions were virtually wiped out. In the end, Hitler unintentionally did more than any other German leader to break down the old authoritarianism—and so make post-war democracy possible.

What of the “other” Germany —

the peace-loving and cosmopolitan Germany of poets and thinkers? Ironically, Ronald Gray, in **The German Tradition in Literature, 1871–1945** (Cambridge, 1965), ascribes at least partial responsibility for the rise of nazism to German writers and philosophers.

Gray condemns the German intellectuals’ obsessive idealism—and their aversion to everyday politics. He sees prototypes of the totalitarian mind-set in the poetry of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), and the will to power philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who once said that “a master race is either on top or it is destroyed.”

Erich Heller disagrees. As he remarks in **The Disinherited Mind** (Harcourt, 1975, paper only), the works of many German poets, writers, and thinkers, from Goethe to Kafka, embody “distinctive symptoms of all modern literature,” particularly “the consciousness of life’s depreciation” amid the social dislocations of the Industrial Revolution.

The German expressionist painters at the beginning of the century, as Peter Selz notes in his engaging **German Expressionist Painting** (Univ. of Calif., 1957, cloth; 1974, paper), are a case in point. From Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s desolate landscapes of the modern industrial city to Franz Marc’s pantheistic, wildly colorful portraits of foxes, horses, and cows, these artists evoked what they saw as the perceived spiritual emptiness of their time.

The continuation of this “modernist revolt” during the Weimar Republic (1919–33) is the subject of Peter Gay’s **Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider** (Harper, 1968, cloth; 1970, paper). As a result of the chaotic Revolution of 1918, the Weimar Republic succeeded the German

Empire. It was, Gay writes, a "creature of reason," a "creation of outsiders, propelled by history into the inside, for a short, dizzying, fragile moment."

Weimar culture accommodated a whirlwind of artistic achievement.

In film, there was that bizarre expressionist creation, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), with its distorted stage effects. The 1920s also saw Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and the heyday of the Berlin political cabaret, with its mimes and raucous skits.

Gay's work is a good introduction to the history of Weimar culture, but there are faults. The underlying inspiration was not, as Gay believes, the Western Enlightenment but German romanticism. Even the Bauhaus—the most famous avant-garde school of "functional" architecture and "rational" design—cannot be understood outside the framework of a peculiar utopianism left over from the days of German expressionism.

Architects in the new German republic, like painters, playwrights, and filmmakers, tried to evoke a messianic sense of social renewal. Walter Gropius, the director of the Bauhaus, thought architecture should be a "crystal symbol of a new faith."

But when he and other artists thought of social change, they did not envision a bourgeois order of the kind found in England or the United States. Rather, as John Willet argues in *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917–1933* (Pantheon, 1979, cloth; 1980, paper), many creations of the Weimar period were "founded on a broadly socialist, and, in many cases, communist ideology and a generally sympathetic alertness to what was going on in Soviet Russia."

Karl Dietrich Bracher describes the dissolution of the Weimar Republic—and the suppression of its culture as well—in *The German Dictatorship* (Praeger, 1970, cloth; 1972, paper), the most thorough and balanced treatment of the rise and consolidation of nazism to date. Bracher, like fellow historians Holborn and Krieger, traces the origins of National Socialism back to Germany's rejection of the Enlightenment. The ultimate cause of nazism, he writes, "was the deep schism between German and Western political thought, and the emergence of a special German sense of destiny with anti-Western overtones."

Norman Rich's *Hitler's War Aims*, 2 vols. (Norton, vol. 1, 1973, cloth; 1976, paper; vol. 2, 1974, cloth), is one of the most provocative studies of Hitler's foreign policy. Rich discusses the interaction between nazi ideology and military planning and concludes that Hitler was not a mere political opportunist, but a "fanatical ideologue" who consistently followed the racist-national principles laid down in *Mein Kampf* (1925).

One key to Hitler's foreign policy was the drive for *Lebensraum* (living space) in the East—an expansionist policy to subjugate "inferior" races and to make more room for German settlements in Eastern Europe and Russia. Rich contends that Hitler never deviated from the policies of *Lebensraum* and the Final Solution. Indeed, his determination to smite the Soviets and to pursue racist extermination policies, without regard to political or military consequences, may have been the "decisive factor in his defeat."

Alan Bullock examines Hitler's character in *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Bantam, 1958; Harper, rev. ed., 1964, cloth & paper; Harper, abr.

ed., 1971, paper), still one of the most comprehensive and perceptive biographies of the Führer. Bullock portrays Hitler as a "political genius"—a master of oratory and a ruthless demagogue determined to destroy his enemies. On the day before his suicide on April 30, 1945, as exploding Russian artillery shells tore away at the protective masonry above the Führer's bunker, Hitler issued his last will and testament: "Above all I charge the leaders of the nation . . . to merciless opposition to the universal poison of all peoples, international Jewry."

In **German Foreign Policies, West and East** (ABC-Clio, 1974, cloth & paper), Peter H. Merkl deals with the legacy of Hitler's destruction—the aftermath of World War II and the division of Germany. Merkl is above all concerned with West Germany's *Ostpolitik* (the policy of reconciliation with the East), détente, and the relationship of both East and West Germany to the rest of Europe. West Germany's future, Merkl believes, depends on its ability to "merge" politically with the West and diplomatically with the East.

If West Germany's diplomatic horizons have broadened considerably during the past decade, so have its contributions to the arts. John Sandford asserts, in **The New German Cinema** (Barnes & Noble, 1980), that German film reached a "historical turning point" in the 1970s, as directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Volker Schlöndorff discovered that they

could combine aesthetic integrity and box-office success. In 1980, Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film.

It is no accident that Günter Grass's novel, **The Tin Drum** (Vintage, 1962, paper; Random, 1971, paper) became the basis for such a popular movie. This novel is the epic tale of Oskar Matzerath, an incorrigible and destructive child who, with piercing screams and fiery tantrums, defies the absurdity of life in the interwar period by refusing, physically, to grow up. It is a mythic commentary on what Grass calls the "Epoch of Infantilism" (the period between the First and Second World Wars), and the surrealist pageantry, moral decay, and senseless destruction it encompassed.

The unfathomable disasters in the years 1914–45 left German writers such as Grass with the conviction that irrationality—represented by Oskar's infantilism—was not merely one of life's unhappy elements but its basic character.

Today, with West Germany's economy and prestige on the rise, the old tragic flaws of German history—national chauvinism, militarism, and authoritarian rule—seem at once vitiated and irrelevant. Whatever problems West Germany has today, they do not stem from the historical tradition that drove Germany into two world wars. That was laid to rest, along with the ghost of Hamlet, in the rubble of Berlin in 1945.

—Kim R. Holmes

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