

A MIGHTY FORTRESS: A NEW HISTORY OF THE GERMAN PEOPLE

Lecture and discussion at the Goethe-Institut Washington, April 14, 2004. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Goethe-Institut. Speaker: Steven Ozment (Harvard University). Moderator: Frank F. Wagner (Goethe-Institut).

Fifty-eight million Americans claim whole or partial German descent. Yet a great many of them, along with non-German Americans, know Germany primarily through two world wars and their aftermath. Those decades have colored two millennia of German history, and continue to influence the way Germany is viewed today. Steven Ozment's *A Mighty Fortress* argues that this twentieth-century history is neither a true mirror of who Germans have been, nor a proper guide to who they are today. The book presents German history from its beginning (in Roman times) leading up to the present day. "Whatever else may be said of Germans today," Ozment writes in his introduction, "they have survived their enemies and themselves, seemingly against all odds."

Unfortunately, Ozment argued, in American historiography, Germany has two histories: that of "before and after the 1930s and 1940s, and that of the 1930s and forties." This, he insisted, is confused historiography. As a result, no other modern nation has a more "predictable and enforced politically correct reading of its history." In Ozment's opinion, this view of German history as prelude to and aftermath of National Socialism and the Holocaust does scant justice to the German past prior to the twentieth century. The goal of the book is to recover mainstream German history. *A Mighty Fortress* is a history for those Germans who after 1949, and particularly following the reunification of 1990, have sought to remake themselves into their "better and truer historical selves." In a sense, the popular German film *Run Lola Run* emphatically asserts this by showing that "the life of an individual or a nation can go terribly wrong, yet both can struggle back and redeem the good that was always there."

A Mighty Fortress illustrates how the Germans are a "composite people" who like to adopt as their own the perceived best qualities of other peoples and cultures. Furthermore, Ozment maintains that for most of their history, Germans have embraced order and authority without totalitarianism, and pursued freedom and equality without democracy. Totalitarianism and democracy were new twentieth-century experiments for Germans. In the modern democracy that is Germany

today, freedom and equality work in tandem with authority and order. Unlike the egalitarian democracies found in the United States and France, however, German democracy places more limitations on freedom. But this is not necessarily a negative thing: "Germans do not believe that freedom must be untidy." In some ways, Germany can perhaps even serve as a model for modern multicultural democracies and the ills they suffer.

Frank F. Wagner