The Challenge of German Histories: An American Retrospective

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For many decades American historians have wrestled with the "German problem," trying to reconcile the discrepancy between cultural creativity and political ineptitude. One prominent scholar was Gordon Craig, who went to Central Europe in 1935 as a student, intent on writing a senior thesis on "The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Republic." Enrolling in the University of Munich, he visited museums like the Old Pinakothek, operas like *The Ring of the Nibelungen,* und plays like *Faust*. These "masterpieces of high German culture made a deep and lasting impression" on him, but he also encountered many examples "of abuse of culture and, indeed, of inhumanity and barbarism." The young Scottish-American was appalled by the ugly xenophobia and rampant anti-Semitism of the Nazis, which foreshadowed another World War and racist genocide. Realizing that "no people is harder to generalize about," he dedicated his life's work to deciphering these contradictions. This made him the leading US authority of his generation

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on the Germans, striving for a balanced interpretation of their achievements and crimes.[1]

In the emergence of national histories of major European countries, the German past has played a special role in the US, since it represented the chief enemy during both World Wars. While the German conception of *Wissenschaft* was tarnished by its collaboration with the Third Reich, much sympathy developed for the terrible fate of the Jewish refugees which helped carry some of the better aspects of continental scholarship across the Atlantic.[2] At the same time, four dozen talented academics including Harold C. Deutsch and Leonard Krieger worked for the Office of Strategic Services in order to provide intelligence assessments that would help defeat the ruthless enemy.[3] Hollywood also sought to contribute to the war effort by making anti-fascist movies like *Casablanca* with the help of refugee producers and actors. An entire cohort of the best and brightest students chose German history in order to figure out what had gone wrong again. Hence, in English-speaking countries a broad public interest developed in the Central European past, which inspired research and created an audience for the books and lectures that helped constitute a new academic field.

This critical American perspective also served as a kind of external conscience for the reemergence of historical scholarship in West Germany that broke with its nationalist tradition. While German scholars could shrug off the exaggerations of war-time propaganda such as A.J.P. Taylor's *Course of German History*, more moderate democratic voices such as Hajo Holborn, who produced an influential synthesis of German history, had to be taken seriously.[4] The allied governments also insisted that the files of the Berlin Document Center and the massive microfilm project of "captured German documents" would serve as an incontrovertible record of German crimes.[5] Competent American reviews of postwar German scholarship also sought to discredit neo-nationalist interpretations. At the same time, exchange programs brought young Germans like Hans-Ulrich Wehler or Jürgen Kocka to the US in order to give a younger generation of postwar academics a chance to experience a democratic system. Finally, in academic disputes such as the

1 Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans* (New York, 1982), 7-11.

2 Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehman and James Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York, 2016).

3 Christoph Mauch, *The Shadow War Against Hitler: The Covert Operations of America's Wartime Secret Intelligence Service* (New York, 2003); Robin W. Winks, *From Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (New York, 1987), 495-97.

4 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany since 1815* (New York, 1946); Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany* (New York, 1959-1969), 3 vols.

5 Astrid Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War* (New York, 2012).

Fischer controversy about German responsibility for the outbreak of World War One, American scholars supported critical views.[6]

Half a century later, German history has lost much of its unusual appeal because it has become normalized like the past of other countries. The growing temporal distance has robbed it of its contemporary attraction since most of the eyewitnesses have passed away. There are ever fewer veterans of the Allied forces left who can participate in victory parades on May 8 or November 11. Moreover, Holocaust observances have increasing difficulty in finding survivors who can speak with authority about their horrendous suffering. Other issues like the pernicious effects of US racism dramatized in the *New York Times'* 1619 project have taken the place of Nazi racism, while the focus of interest has shifted to the Global South.[7] The stability of the Federal Republic and the reunification with its East German rival have largely resolved the political dimension of the "German problem" by inverting the fear of Berlin's dominance into frustration with its lack of leadership. These drastic contextual changes raise the question: does German historiography have a future?

Based on my personal experience of about six decades of teaching, writing, and service in the US and Germany, the following remarks will address this issue in several steps. A first point to be clarified is whether the decline is real or imagined and if it involves only Germany or Europe as a whole.[8] A second topic to be discussed is the continuing strength of the financial and organizational infrastructure of the field, which is likely to support its survival. A third source of strength concerns the emergence of a critical master narrative of modern Germany that underpins an exemplary politics of contrition. A fourth encouraging argument will suggest that new topical and methodological departures in gender construction, everyday lives, memory politics, and transnational research are promising to revitalize the discipline. The conclusion will argue that, beyond these innovations, the field will require a greater recognition of the plurality of German political systems and the diversity of German speaking people in order to persist.

6 Philipp Stelzel, *History after Hitler: A Transatlantic Enterprise* (Philadelphia, 2019).

7 Nikole Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York, 2021); Konrad H. Jarausch, "Balancing History Books: Some Comments on Current Memory Wars," *The Czech Historical Review* 121 (2023): 339-353.

8 Catherine Epstein, "German Historians at the Back of the Pack: Hiring Patterns in Modern European History, 1945-2010," *Central European History* 46 (2013): 599 – 639.

I. Indications of Decline

Propelled by the turn away from Europe in general and Germany in particular, signs of a decline of German history have recently multiplied. Surveys by the Modern Language Association have shown that the teaching of the German language has dramatically decreased by one-third from its peak to 54,000 students per year. On the high-school level, many school systems have abandoned German altogether, making Spanish the undisputed leader, followed by French, and demoting German from its once leading position to fourth place even behind Japanese.[9] The rapid assimilation of German immigrants into English speakers has also reduced the number of heritage speakers. At the same time chemists and engineers no longer learn German for technical reasons. Classes in the Goethe Institute and web-based programs like Babble are too limited to pick up the slack. In contrast to the bilingual ascent of Spanish and the cultural attraction of French, "the awful German language" (Mark Twain) has a reputation of being harder to learn. This implosion of the linguistic base has made access to German history more difficult.

Over the past decades, the impact of German ethnicity on American intellectual life has also weakened considerably. Tarnished as the primary enemy during the World Wars, the once vibrant German-American subculture has all but disappeared, leaving only a few pathetic traces such as an annual *Oktoberfest* with beer and an oompah band – but without German speakers![10] No longer do thousands of American students go to Germany in order to learn about the modern research university and earn advanced degrees. Neither German philosophy and music, nor German science and technology are any longer considered to be among the global leaders.[11] The world wide web has allowed transatlantic access to German television, but that requires language competence. All too few TV series – *Babylon Berlin* being the exception – are available on streaming channels, while German films are only occasionally distributed when they have Third Reich or GDR content such as *Lives of Others*. Rarely are books translated and even fewer titles make

9 Ryan Quinn, "Foreign Language Enrollment Sees Steepest Decline on Record," https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/curriculum/2023/11/16/foreign-language-enrollment-sees-steepest-decline-record.

10 For example, https://visithermann.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-hermanns-2023-oktoberfest/.

11 Jack Dukes and Joachim Remak, eds., *Another Germany: A Reconsideration of the Imperial Era* (Boulder, CO, 1988). Currently Germany is only in fifth place in study abroad at 4%. https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/leading-destinations/.

it onto American best-seller lists. Individual exceptions notwithstanding, there is little sustained transatlantic cultural dialogue that would inspire concern with German history.

Social ties have also eroded noticeably in recent decades. Unlike in the postwar period, when there still was sizable transatlantic migration, German emigration to the US has slowed to a trickle. The number of US soldiers stationed "back home in Germany," as the Vietnam phrase had it, has also diminished to about 50,000, although there are still American bases which serve as logistical and medical staging areas for the US armed forces.[12] Transatlantic tourism to the romantic Rhine has remained steady at about three million per year, but it has always been smaller than travel to Britain, France or Italy. As a result of political differences about military interventions there has also been a growing anti-Americanism in Germany, which has reduced the number of German visitors to the United States. In the United States, especially in the Jewish community, some Germanophobe sentiments linger due to the appalling atrocities of the Holocaust. No doubt, various political initiatives have sought to strengthen transatlantic ties such as the American Council on Germany, the Atlantik-Brücke or the American Academy in Berlin.[13] But they are ultimately only a drop in the bucket, which does not suffice to reinvigorate public interest in the problems of the German past.

As a result of these contextual changes, undergraduate enrollment in European history, graduate fellowship applications, and hiring for teaching positions have all noticeably declined during the last several decades. The once mandatory requirement of enrolling in a "Western Civilization" course has changed to "World Civilization" or "Global History" in order to respond to the increasing diversity of the student body.[14] Where national German history is still being taught, it has shrunk from a two-semester sequence to a single semester. At the same time the number of graduate fellowship applications to the DAAD, Fulbright, or Berlin Program has also decreased. The social sciences have abandoned national specializations, while cultural studies have decontextualized and moved into theoretical flights of fancy. According to job surveys of the Amer-

12 Adam Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans, and a German Town, 1945-1952* (Bloomington, 2013).

13 American Council on Germany, https://acgusa.org/; Atlantik Bruecke, https://www.atlantik-bruecke.org/; American Academy in Berlin, https://www.americanacademy.de/.

14 Thomas W. Davis, "Starting from Scratch: Shifting from Western Civ to World History," *Perspectives on History*, December 1, 1996.

ican Historical Association, academic positions have also shifted from Europe to the Global South, aggravating the job crisis.[15] These statistical indicators substantiate the widespread impression that German history is increasingly under siege.[16]

II. Infrastructure Support

In spite of such signs of decline, the academic infrastructure of German studies in the United States remains remarkably strong and varied. In contrast to the limited funding for British, French or Russian history, the German government has been investing considerable sums of money in its "foreign cultural policy" in order to establish a nuanced and sympathetic image abroad.[17] When the American Fulbright exchange program faced severe legislative cuts, the German government stepped in and picked up the majority of the costs. Even more extensive is the fellowship program of the German Academic Exchange Service, which ranges from support for study in Germany through funding for graduate PhD projects all the way to financing for faculty research. Moreover, the Berlin Program in German and European Studies supports both graduate and postdoctoral research, while the Bundestag fellowships offer aid as well. Supplemented by the Humboldt Foundation, these funding sources support research on German and European history, improve language competence, and provide lived experiences of present-day Germany.

Another unparalleled initiative has been the establishment of institutions in North America that foster both research and teaching. To strengthen German-American relations the German government and transatlantic donors, with the help of intermediaries such as Guido Goldman, funded the creation of half a dozen "centers of excellence" for German and European Studies at leading US and Canadian institutions. Ranging from Harvard to Berkeley, from Georgetown to Toronto, these interdisciplinary centers have provided academic expertise and institutional continuity for German studies.[18] Similarly, the German Academic Exchange Service has sponsored about eighteen visiting lecturer position at North Amer-

15 Robert Townsend, "Decline of the West or the Rise of the Rest? Data from 2010 Shows Rebalancing of Field Coverage in Departments," *Perspectives on History*, September 1, 2011.

16 Even in Germany the professional associations are sounding the same alarm about the decline of historical studies. Niko Lamprecht and Lutz Raphael, "Geschichte für die Gegenwart," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 27, 2024.

17 Frank Trommler, *Kulturmacht ohne Kompass: Deutsche auswärtige Kulturbeziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, 2014).

18 Martin Klingst, *Guido Goldman: Transatlantic Bridge Builder* (New York, 2021), 85-160; Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/.

ican institutions including the University of North Carolina that have stimulated undergraduate teaching and graduate research as well as outreach activities to the wider public. For the visitors this program has offered experience in American academe and for the host institutions it has provided fresh information on current German affairs as well as recent European developments. While it is difficult to measure the impact of such programs, participants praise their effect on transatlantic communication.[19]

Part of this institutional approach has also been the foundation of the German Historical Institute in Washington and on the West Coast. Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who was himself a historian and political scientist, was concerned about possible negative effects of the creation of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington on Germany's image in the United States. Therefore, he supported the establishment of a historical institute that would present a more positive version of the German past like similar institutions in London, Paris or Rome. However, the scholarly community created an academic center of German-American research that also confronted the negative aspects of the German past.[20] Since the GHI insisted on intellectual independence and on historical research, the German government helped in establishing another American-German Institute in Washington, directed first by Gerald Livingston and later by Jackson Janes, which was attached to the Johns Hopkins University. Yet another German effort was also the donation of an endowment for the German Marshall fund that supports social science research on Europe.[21]

At the same time, vigorous professional associations are also promoting German history in English-speaking countries. The oldest group is the Conference Group for Central European History, founded after the war as a forum within the American Historical Association. It is a professional society, overseeing the German document microfilm project and organizing scholarly panels at the annual AHA conference.[22] An interdisciplinary alternative is the German Studies Association, founded half a century ago in the West as a discussion forum and transatlantic conference venue that has become popular with several thousand members.

19 Andrea Sinn, "Transatlantic Mediators or Scholars Abroad? The German Studies Professorship Program of the DAAD in North America" in Karen Hagemann and Konrad H. Jarausch, eds., *German Migrant Historians in North America* (New York, 2024), 43–62.

20 Scott Krause, "German Politics on the Potomac: The Contested Foundation of the German Historical Institute and Transatlantic Exchange" in: *German Migrant Historians in North America*, 63–83.

21 American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, AICGS, https://www.aicgs.org; German Marshall Fund, GMF, https://www.gmfus.org/.

22 Central European History Society, https://www.centraleuropeanhistory.org/ and https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/central-european-history.

Its annual conferences sponsor a plethora of panels, from history to cultural studies to the social sciences.[23] The Friends of the GHI provide a link between American networks and the German Historical Institute. In Britain there is also the somewhat smaller German History Society. All these groups support journals, award prizes, offer stipends, and promote German history, while H-German offers a web-based discussion space. As long as they continue to exist, these fellowships, institutions and associations provide a firm base for English-speaking German scholarship.

III. Rise of Self-Criticism

In many ways the central achievement of the field of German history has been the contested emergence of a critical version of the Central European past. After the First World War, the majority of German historians supported an apologetic version of a national master narrative, culminating in the Foreign Office sponsored journal *Die Kriegsschuldfrage*. After the second defeat, in 1945, the effort of patriotic scholars such as Gerhard Ritter or Hans Rothfels to salvage positive elements of German traditions failed because of the overwhelming evidence of Nazi responsibility for the outbreak and conduct of the Second World War.[24] The Nuremberg Trials, the founding of the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg, and the moving testimony of survivors made it impossible to shift blame to Polish stubbornness, Soviet expansionism or British appeasement. Moreover, research by international scholars including Walter Hofer, William Langer, and Hugh Trevor-Roper discredited revisionist attempts by David Hoggan and other neo-nationalists to exonerate German elites.[25]

It took several decades of intense controversy to establish a critical master narrative of the German past, a process in which Anglo-American scholars cooperated with progressive German historians. One such memory conflict was the Fischer controversy of the early 1960s, in which the Protestant Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer took on the academic establishment of his own country

23 German Studies Association, https://www.thegsa.org and https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/german-studies-review

24 Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, 2003).

25 David L. Hoggan, *The Forced Far: When Peaceful Revision Failed* (Costa Mesa, CA, 1989). Cf. Till Knobloch, "August Crisis: How Hitler Went to War in 1939" (PhD Diss., Chapel Hill, 2024).

by asserting that the Imperial Germany's government bore overwhelming responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War.[26] Another similar encounter was the *Sonderweg* debate of the 1970s and 1980s about Germany's deviation from Western values, which pitted a younger group of leftwing historians, led by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, against more moderate scholars like Thomas Nipperdey or Lothar Gall.[27] Similarly, in the 1986 *Historikerstreit* the leftist philosopher Jürgen Habermas clashed with the traditionalist Ernst Nolte over the origins and magnitude of Nazi crimes.[28] In each of these controversies the public support of leading American historians such as Fritz Stern or Gerald Feldman helped to reinforce the emergence of a critical perspective on German history.[29]

The struggle between the apologists and critics of the German past culminated in the American metanarrative of the racial genocide of the Holocaust. Since only a few thousand Jewish survivors were left in the Federal Republic, the impetus to confront the mass murder of the Jews came largely from the outside. Since the Allied forces focused on the liberation of their comrades from Nazi imprisonment, the general public and the academic community only gradually became aware of the unimaginable extent of the systematic killing of an entire ethnic group. Through judicial cases like the Eichmann trial or the Frankfurt trials, literary representations such as the *Diary of Anne Frank,* and research by historians such as Christopher Browning, the Holocaust became synonymous with ultimate evil. Through the establishment of memorials on the sites of concentration camps, the testimonies of eyewitnesses such as Tom Angress, and the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, a younger generation was able to confront the horrors of Nazi crimes.[30] Neo-Nazi efforts at denial by the Institute of Historical Review were unable to stop the rise of a critical view of the German past.

While in the US the emergence of a critical perspective on German history was largely self-evident, in the Federal Republic of Germany such memory politics remained quite controversial. To be sure, Chancellor Adenauer realized that the price of Germany's

26 John Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (London, 1975); and Annika Mombauer, "The Fischer Controversy 50 years on," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (2013): 231-240.

27 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918* (Leamington Spa, 1985) vs. Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1866-1918* (Munich, 1990). Cf. Jürgen Kocka, "Looking Back on the *Sonderweg*," *Central European History* 51 (2018): 137-142.

28 Klaus Große Kracht, *Die zankende Zunft: Historische Kontroversen in Deutschland nach 1945* (Göttingen, 2005).

29 Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I have Known* (New York, 2006).

30 Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD, 2016), 3rd ed. Cf. Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

acceptance in the Western community of nations was public contrition and reparation payments. At the same time, rearmament and conservative electoral success required the exoneration of Nazi fellow travelers. In East Germany the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had fewer scruples in condemning fascist perpetrators, even if the Marxist approach tended to overlook the racist dimension of Nazi crimes.[31] In the West, political leaders, intellectuals, and academics gradually came to embrace a politics of ritual apology. But large segments of the general population remained reluctant to confront their personal and political guilt. The result of this tension between official contrition and private obduracy was a series of scandals, ranging from President Ronald Reagan's ill-advised 1985 visit of the Bitburg cemetery, where Waffen-SS-men were buried, to Philipp Jenninger's misleading 1988 Bundestag speech. Only gradually did much of the German public begin to accept its historic responsibility.[32]

Due to its focus on the World Wars and the Holocaust, German history has remained more tied to traditional historical methods than other fields of European history. For instance, the new social history of the 1970s and 1980s came from the history workshop movement in Great Britain, in which E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm combined Marxist perspectives with bottom-up sympathy for the oppressed.[33] At the same time, French historians such as Joan Scott or Natalie Davis were more involved in the linguistic turn, experimenting with deconstruction in a new kind of cultural history.[34] Only Russian historians remained similarly conventional, since they were focused on Cold War disputes between Communist critics like Richard Pipes and liberal scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick. As a result, fewer innovative impulses emanated from German historians, but there were some, such as the structuralism of the Bielefeld School or the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the younger left.[35] While German historians succeeded in forging a critical narrative of the past, their traditionalist approach created a reputation of methodological conventionality.

Gender history, for example, also came late to German history, mostly from the United States. The master narrative of the Ger-

31 Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (Detroit, 1985).

32 Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948-1990* (Darmstadt, 1999).

33 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

34 Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT, 2005), rev. ed.

35 Georg Iggers, ed., *The Social History of Politics: Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing since 1945* (Dover, N.H., 1985).

man past was focused on male issues such as war, genocide, and dictatorship – even though women were severely affected by these developments as well. In contrast to the Anglo-American focus on the struggle of suffragettes for the vote, historians of German women tended to focus more on social motherhood in the family, education and society. While Western feminists were focused on theoretical gender debates, their Eastern sisters were more involved in pursuing practical gains such as universal childcare. As Karen Hagemann and Jean Quateart have pointed out, it took patient lobbying and networking to establish the legitimacy of a gender perspective and the expansion of positions for female scholars.[36] Eventually, however, these efforts did succeed in adding opposition to patriarchy and homophobia to the critical understanding of German history.

IV. Avenues of Exploration

Beyond establishing a critical perspective, German historians have started to explore a number of other issues that have attracted public interest to their field. One approach is the Weimar analogy, which focuses on the suffocation of democracy under the onslaught of extremist populism. The rise of right-wing movements in Europe and the US has raised the fear that self-government will crumble from within, if its enemies manage to use democratic methods to seize power and establish dictatorships like the Italian Fascists or the German Nazis.[37] While the concern about the vulnerability of democracy seems well justified, Christopher Browning has pointed out that the current populist wave need not succeed as long as democracies understand the danger and defend their institutions. Similarly, Martin Sabrow has argued that democratic government in present-day Germany rests on much stronger political and economic foundations than during the 1920s.[38] Historical comparisons with the fall of the Weimar Republic are therefore most stimulating when they not only point out similarities but also emphasize potential differences in outcomes.

Another interpretative puzzle concerns modern dictatorship because today there are more authoritarian regimes than democracies

36 Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert, eds., *Gendering Modern German History: Themes, Debates, Revisions* (New York, 2007).

37 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York, 2018).

38 Christopher R. Browning, "A New Kind of Fascism," *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2023; Martin Sabrow, "Wiederholt sich Weimar? Die Krise der Berliner Republik im historischen Vergleich," *Tagesspiegel*, March 12, 2024.

worldwide. Already contemporaries like George Orwell were shocked by the similarities between communism and fascism, although both ideologies were involved in a bloody struggle for dominance on the continent. Postwar scholarship clustered around the concept of totalitarianism, which stressed the similarities of both regimes in terms of their political control. Recent research, however, has emphasized their ideological differences so as to explain their mutual hostility. Scholars of fascism have stressed its biopolitical racism, which precipitated both a negative cleansing of the body politic through exclusion and murder and a positive pressure on increasing Aryan reproduction.[39] In contrast, I have called the East German communist regime a "welfare dictatorship" that combined a one-party state with an effort to implement social services. These classic cases of modern dictatorship also contain a number of military regimes and authoritarian forms of government, like Franco's Spain, that raise conceptual problems of definition.

For the postwar period the interpretative challenge revolves around the development of the Federal Republic as a "success story" of democratic recovery. One debate addresses the question whether the Allied occupation or the antifascist minority or both deserve the credit for West Germany's rehabilitation. While conservative scholars have tended to praise Konrad Adenauer and the CDU, leftist historians prefer to point to Willy Brandt and the SPD. Though intellectuals often criticized the appalling persistence of Nazi remnants in Bonn, with the so-called "peaceful revolution of 1989" the "old Federal Republic" suddenly looked more positive because it was validated by the East German desire for reunification. During the concurrent movement towards European integration there has been much talk about a "German model" of the social market economy as a key to political freedom and economic prosperity. With the rise of the populist Alternative for Germany, the crucial question has become how much the Germans have mentally distanced themselves from National Socialism and how stable the transformation of political culture will be in the future.[40]

39 Paul Corner and Jie-Huyn Lim, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship* (London, 2016); Shelley Baranowski et al. eds, *A Companion to Nazi Germany* (Hoboken, 2018).

40 Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995* (New York, 2006); Frank Trentmann, *Out of the Darkness: The Germans 1942-2022* (Allen Lane, 2023).

The counterpoint to the western success story is the eastern failure narrative regarding the disintegration of the Communist dictatorship of the GDR. A whole cohort of doctoral students has wrestled with the question of whether East Germany was just "a footnote of world history," in Stefan Heym's sarcastic phrase, or something more that deserved to be taken seriously. On the one hand, the availability of the Stasi and party files made the SED system look like a gigantic prison, validating the totalitarian perspective. On the other hand, recollections of its social services, especially for women, made the east German state appear like a failed experiment in progressive aspirations cut short by incompetent practice, a veritable alternative to the capitalist west. The GDR suffered from the double marginality of being the most western part of the Soviet empire and the most eastern dimension of western Germany. As a result, historians have disagreed about how the East German development should be integrated into the postwar narrative: as just a temporary deviation from the main course or as a story in its own right.[41]

Another strategy for breaking out of the national master narrative is the comparative and relational expansion into the European context. German historians have made surprisingly little use of the wider perspective of comparison and cultural transfer, centering their research on the Western perspective, in which German development often seems lagging. There has been a lively exchange with France on the level of school textbooks, but less interest in Britain and even fewer efforts to compare with Eastern and Southern developments, where Germany might seem to be ahead.[42] The research on European integration only rarely appears in narrative syntheses, which are still largely framed in national terms. This is all the more regrettable since the Eastward expansions of the EU and NATO have recentered the continent on Germany, reviving its core position in Europe, which was already discussed by Thomas Mann.[43] Some of the reluctance to engage the European dimension comes from an understandable fear of appearing like a hegemon, but the complexity of relationships with continental neighbors has to be addressed nonetheless.

41 Christoph Klessmann, ed., *The Divided Past: Rewriting Post-War German History* (Oxford, 2001); Konrad H. Jarausch, "Die Teile als Ganzes erkennen. Zur Integration der beiden deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichten," *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 1 (2004): 10-30.

42 Peter Geiss, Daniel Henri, Guillaume Le Quinterec, eds., *Histoire / Geschichte. Schülerband Sekundarstufe II: Europa und die Welt vom Wiener Kongress bis 1945*. vol. 2. *Deutsch-französisches Geschichtsbuch* (Stuttgart, 2007).

43 Hartmut Kaelble, *A Social History of Europe, 1945-2000: Recovery and Transformation After Two World Wars* (New York, 2013); Konrad H. Jarausch, *Embattled Europe: A Progressive Alternative* (Princeton, 2021).

Yet another way of broadening perspectives on the German past might be a further opening towards global history to engage developments beyond the nation state and the continent. Such an approach could begin with transnational questions, such as the governance of the Rhine River, that cut across several frontiers or the development of international associations like the Red Cross.[44] Although Germany was a latecomer and lost its colonial possessions after the First World War, the colonial past has recently attracted much attention by the campaign to repatriate cultural artifacts and to change street names. Moreover, there is the controversy about the connection between the genocidal warfare against the Herero and Nama in the first decade of the twentieth century and the Nazi Holocaust as well as the murderous impact of imperialism in general.[45] Another neglected perspective concerns the diaspora of German settlements around the globe, which created German language islands in places where Germany had no formal colonies such as in Latin America. Though it is difficult to integrate this aspect into a national narrative, in Glenn Penny's telling phrase, this would be a "German History unbound."[46]

The biggest of the diasporas, which is often overlooked by German historians and ignored by Americanists, is German settlement in the United States. According to the 2020 census 15.5 million Americans identify themselves as having German origins and another about 30 million list themselves as of partial German descent. In the nineteenth century this mass immigration created a flourishing subculture of schools, associations, newspapers, and restaurants in which migrants could maintain their heritage, while learning to cope with their newly adopted country. Because of its mixed loyalties, this German-American community was decimated by the First World War and further shattered by the Second World War. Though German immigration revived a bit after 1945, there were too few newcomers to replenish the ethnic numbers, especially since German speakers quickly assimilated themselves into the dominant Anglo-American culture.[47] Therefore one might call them an "invisible minority" with some vague traditions in the Upper Midwest, but without an identifiable presence. These

44 David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World: A Global History, 1500-2000* (New York, 2023).

45 A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge, 2021).

46 H. Glenn Penny, *German History Unbound: From 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2022).

47 Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, eds., *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History* (Philadelphia, 1985), 2 vols.

tantalizing examples show various ways in which the German past might have a future.

V. Implications of Diversity

In conclusion, I would contend that if German history is to persist, it must engage the extraordinary diversity of its people, which differs from the uniformity of many of its neighbors. As Helmut Walser Smith has recently shown, the life courses of German speakers during the past several centuries have been quite unstable, torn by war and civil conflict. Due to the strength of local dialects, a standard German language emerged quite late and remained contested, with variants like Swiss German splitting off. Ever since the Reformation there has been strife between different confessions and within them, leading to much bloodshed. As a result of in- and out-migration, there were no firmly agreed borders, with foreigners like Poles living within German states and diasporas of German settlers spanning the globe. Moreover, German-speaking Europe experienced more than half a dozen regime changes from the Holy Roman Empire to the Federal Republic. Since the national state existed only for three quarters of a century, scholars addressing the German problem ought to begin by exploring this plurality of different Germanies.[48]

The nation-state focus of German history has created a rather misleading narrative that emphasizes a continuity which hardly existed in the past. In contrast to the centralized countries of Western Europe, the Holy Roman Empire, the German Confederation, and even the Bismarckian federal state created an amazing variety of governments which transcended a single trajectory.[49] The national liberal historians of the nineteenth century presented a unified national story that was meant to legitimate the establishment of the nation that they were writing about. It would be more constructive to accept the religious, regional, social, and sexual diversity of German experiences instead of trying to force them into a unidirectional course. The richness of the German past consists precisely in its variety rather than in its postulated

48 Helmut Walser-Smith, *Germany: A Nation in its Time* (New York, 2020); Richard J. Evans, *Rereading German History: From Unification to Reunification 1800-1996* (London, 1997).

49 William W. Hagen, *German History in Modern Times: Four Lives of the Nation* (New York, 2012).

uniformity. Any interpretation must therefore acknowledge the tension between a mainstream construction of Germanness and the more peripheral aspects representing the margins, struggling to assert themselves.[50]

This German plurality has also created a fragmented memory culture that resists being pressed into a homogeneous mold. To be sure, school textbooks, political speeches, and anniversary celebrations like the Day of German Unity tend to present a single official version of the past that claims to speak for all Germans. But various religions, regions, genders, and social classes view the shared past through different lenses, and new immigrant groups are fashioning their own memory communities under the larger umbrella of Germany. Political parties also emphasize different aspects of the past, with the Right generally being more apologetic and the Left tending to be more critical. Similarly, the general public tends to downplay Nazi crimes, while intellectuals, journalists, and scholars offer a more self-critical stance. Neighboring countries that have suffered from German occupation during the world wars usually have a more negative view of German development than citizens within. Instead of struggling for "a correct German history," would it not be better to think of a multivocal conversation about the German past among different interlocutors?[51]

As a result, several conflicting narratives have evolved which claim to represent the central thrust of German development. Social historians tend to present a modernization story of industrialization and social advance similar to other nations, while political scholars prefer a nation-building tale that puts Germany, together with Italy, into the center of Europe.[52] The two world wars are often seen as a product of unbridled militarism, while the genocidal Holocaust is usually presented as an epitome of evil due to the mass murder of the European Jews.[53] In the post-war period the division of the country with a more successful democratization in the West and a Communist dictatorship in the East presents a different challenge of explaining the reunification of a chastened national state within an integrating Europe. These contradictory developments hardly fit into a single narrative line, requiring in-

50 Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman, eds., *German History from the Margins* (Bloomington, 2006)

51 James J. Sheehan, "What is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): 223.

52 Paul Nolte, *Hans-Ulrich Wehler: Historiker und Zeitgenosse* (Munich, 2015).

53 Alan E. Steinweis, *The People's Dictatorship: A History of Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2023).

stead competing explanations.[54] Since neither the cautionary tale of catastrophe nor the success story of recovery encompasses the entire German trajectory, the challenge consists of explaining their mutual relationship.

The lasting import of the German past therefore derives from the contrast between the legacies of genocidal war and democratic recovery.[55] In retrospect it is astounding that the twice defeated country would, with the help of the occupying powers and a critical minority within, succeed in owning up to its historical responsibility for mass murder. The process of wrestling with such a toxic past through *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (working through the past) was long and laborious, full of scandals and backsliding. It took a combination of external pressure and internal self-criticism to overcome the temptation of apologetics that has fueled the rise of rightwing movements like the Alliance for Germany. But in spite of all the appalling shortcomings, the country has managed to face its own guilt and to compensate its victims at least in part. This was a singular achievement which has created a global standard for historical self-criticism in postdictatorial transitions. The central lesson of the German past is therefore the acceptance of responsibility for prior crimes as a precondition for democratic renewal.[56] It is this dual message that makes it important to keep telling the story of German history.

54 Frank Bösch, ed., *A History Shared and Divided: East and West Germany since the 1970s* (New York, 2018).

55 Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian, eds., *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History* (Stanford, 2003).

56 Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Burden of German History: A Transatlantic Life* (New York, 2023).

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