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The Course of German History

In those extraordinary months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, when discussion of the unification of the two Germanies was for the first time in forty years back on the serious political agenda, many voices were raised giving views on 'the German question'. From a variety of quarters, prejudices were aired which had lain dormant – along with the memories, gas masks and other relics of the Second World War – over the years when the Cold War and the balance of terror had seemed to ensure a fragile peace in a divided Europe. Suddenly, the prospect of a united, economically powerful, and politically sovereign Germany, active again in central Europe and in a position to mediate between East and West, aroused strong emotions among those whose view of Germany had been largely confined to an ill-assorted combination of images of Hitler and sleek West German capitalist competitors. Who were the Germans? What was their national character, if they had one? Who were those people who called themselves Germans, from the other, eastern, side of the rapidly crumbling Iron Curtain, who in many ways seemed not a bit like their western brothers and sisters? Provoked into having to make a rapid response to the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe, many people outside Germany found they had a serious deficit of knowledge and understanding. Many Germans, too – both East and West – found that the Iron Curtain, and the proclaimed 'zero hour' of 1945, had raised barriers to informed interpretation. History – although it did not come to an end in 1989, as some pundits, like the American scholar Fukuyama, wished to proclaim – did indeed seem to have stopped, as far as many textbooks were concerned, in 1945. Thereafter, politics and sociology took over – to provide partial snapshots of an apparently eternal present, unconnected with the radically different past.

But prejudices based on partial perceptions of Hitler's rule, more than half a century earlier, combined with limited impressions of a rapidly changing present, can scarcely provide a secure basis of understanding. The 'land in the centre of Europe', Germany, had for decades held an uneasy position in the European and world balance of power – as well as being an extraordinary powerhouse of creativity, in cultural and intellectual as well as economic respects. The complexities of German history demand serious and detailed engagement – and many observers have seen it as a most peculiar history, thus provoking heated debates on interpretation.

Over the centuries, there has been a 'German question'. Some analysts have seen its beginnings – somewhat anachronistically – in the 'failure' to establish a unified state in the Middle Ages. In the days of the politically decentralized 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation', the multiplicity of German lands – ranging from the more important secular and ecclesiastical principalities and city states through to the minuscule fiefdoms of 'independent imperial knights' – formed an interdependent system over which the emperors (often pursuing dynastic interests outside the Empire) never quite gained central control. The cultural and political conflicts involved in the Reformation of the sixteenth century helped to institutionalize the decentralization of the German lands. Religious differences coincided and overlapped with political conflicts to confirm this diversity in the course of the seventeenth century, in the series of conflicts which formed the so-called Thirty Years War (1618–48). Yet the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was effectively able only to seal a stalemate: neither religious uniformity nor political centralization was achieved. The territorial rulers enjoyed sovereignty within their own states, while still remaining formally subordinate to the Emperor. Clashes among states competing for domination in the emerging European state system continued in the 'age of absolutism' of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While, from the myriad of small states which made up 'Germany', Prussia emerged as a powerful rival to Austria, the relatively weak German lands were still easily overrun by an expansionist post-revolutionary France under Napoleon.

Under the impact of Napoleonic aggression, a fundamental reorganization of the domestic and external affairs of the German states was begun. In 1806 the Holy Roman Empire was abolished. Legal, social and economic reforms were introduced, either as a direct result of Napoleonic rule or in a form of 'defensive modernization'. After the eventual defeat of Napoleon, the formation of a German Confederation in 1815 included a strengthened and enlarged Prussia as an intended bulwark against France in the West, tsarist Russia in the east. At the same time, with territorial reorganization and a great reduction in the number of German states, other states too

had increased in size and importance, many duchies having achieved the status of kingdom for the first time with the demise of the old Empire.

In the course of the nineteenth century it proved to be the economically more advanced Prussia which was able to gain the edge over Austria in competition for domination over the medium-sized German states. Prussia was in the forefront of moves towards economic integration in the Customs Union, in the century which was to see those dramatic processes of transformation associated with industrialization. Attempts to achieve political unification of the German states under liberal auspices failed in 1848, and it was ultimately the Prussian Chancellor Bismarck's policies of 'blood and iron' that produced the unification, fraught with tensions, of a 'small Germany' (*Kleindeutschland*), excluding Austria, in the second German Empire founded in 1871. First seeking to secure its place in Europe, and then to gain a position among the imperial powers of the world, Imperial Germany proved to be an unstable entity. It came to an end, following defeat in the First World War, in the revolutionary autumn of 1918. After Germany's brief and ill-fated attempt at democracy in the Weimar Republic, the ultimate denouement was to be the genocidal rule of Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich, an empire which was supposed to last a thousand years, but which in the event collapsed in ruins after a mere dozen, characterized by arguably unequalled evil. It was this outcome – this *Götterdämmerung* – which provides the unique twist to the problem of explaining German history.

Many observers have puzzled over this apparently peculiar pattern of German history – this allegedly unique German path, or *Sonderweg*. Diverse attempts have been made to explain its course. Broadly, whether they have wanted to or not, historians of Germany writing after Hitler have had to engage in a long-running battle, characterized by local skirmishes over particular periods and issues, on the questions of 'what went wrong?' and 'when did it go wrong?' A rearguard action has been mounted by those who want to say that not everything did go wrong, or at least, it did not go wrong so early, or it could have been prevented. However far serious historians have tried to step outside this sort of framework, the shadow of Hitler has stretched a long way back, shaping even counter-arguments about the diversity of trends and the non-inevitability of historical outcomes.

Given this sort of context, there has been a widespread (although far from universal) tendency to castigate Germany's past for what it was not: German history has frequently been written in terms of its alleged distortions, failures, 'turning-points where Germany failed to turn' (to use A. J. P. Taylor's phrase). Thus, for example, Germany 'failed' to become a centralized state in the Middle Ages. The 'early

bourgeois revolution' of the 1525 Peasants' War 'failed', because Germany lacked a 'mature' bourgeoisie at this very early date (in the view of Marxists following Friedrich Engels). The 'failure' to resolve the religious and political conflicts associated with the Reformation led to the petty backwater, *Kleinstaaterei* pattern of the eighteenth century, when a sleepy Germany produced, to be sure, some elevated cultural spirits, but remained at one remove from the real driving forces of history evident in Britain's industrial revolution or the bourgeois revolution which put an end to the *ancien régime* in France. The pattern of small states allegedly nurtured the bureaucratic, subject mentality displayed by many Germans. Lutheran doctrines of obedience to worldly authority were compounded by Kantian and Hegelian philosophy in a context of absolutist rule over weak civil societies. In her rude awakening of the nineteenth century, Germany became a 'belated' nation, with the contradictions between an archaic sociopolitical structure and a rapidly modernizing economy ultimately proving too great to bear without unleashing domestic and eventually international conflicts. Germany's by now rather more numerous bourgeoisie proved no less 'immature' in its incapacity for effective politics. And not only were there structural distortions determining Germany's long-term road to catastrophe: the 'land of poets and thinkers' (*Land der Dichter und Denker*) was one allegedly characterized by unique cultural patterns emphasizing docility, apoliticism, an exaggerated faith in bureaucracy, excessive militarism, and so on.

Clearly a brief sketch such as this inevitably bowdlerizes to a certain extent. Nor can justice be done to the full range of attempts to interpret the long sweep of German history. But underlying many such narratives there is a basic, persistent problem which is worth making explicit. To narrate the course of German history in terms of failures and distortions presupposes a 'normal' or 'healthy' pattern of development. Sometimes the (often implicit) model is the development of liberal parliamentary democracy in Britain, or the experience of a 'proper' bourgeois revolution in France; sometimes there is no real country providing a model, but rather a schematic view of 'stages' of historical development. Proponents of 'distorted' versions of German history thus may come from a variety of theoretical traditions, including both liberal and Marxist perspectives. What unites them is the tendency to explain whatever is seen as nasty about recent German history in terms of long-term 'failures' and 'deviations' from some supposedly 'normal' pattern of development.

But there have also been vigorous reactions against this sort of approach, and many historians are trying to ask, with more open minds, about patterns of actual causation – rather than simple depiction of failures – in German history. Determinist views have on the whole been replaced by closer analysis of shorter-term developments

in the context of longer-term traditions and trends. While some historians devote major attention to the role of individual personalities in shaping the course of political history in particular, others have concentrated their energies on exploring patterns of social, economic or cultural development in more detail. Greater theoretical awareness has led to rejections of simple empiricism, and of the belief (based on the views of the great German historian Ranke) that one can seek to recount 'how it actually was', while the experience of Hitler has given cause for thought to those who held that historians should seek to empathize with the people about whom they wrote. Lively debates between proponents of different schools of historiography continue with a vengeance, particularly in Germany, where the moral implications of any historical interpretation appear particularly clear. Given the historical outcome in the rule of Hitler, attribution of causality is also in effect allocation of blame. While this is clearly not the place to embark on a comprehensive historiographical survey, the point may be made that there is no single, universally accepted narrative of German history: the field is characterized by vigorous, sometimes quite acerbic, controversy.

Where does this leave current thinking about twentieth-century German history? There are both broad debates about long-term patterns of continuity and discontinuity, as well as more closely focused arguments on specific issues to do with the collapse of Weimar democracy, the rise of the Nazis, and, of course, the explanation of the ultimately inexplicable – the mass murder of over six million people in the death camps. There is also a set of debates about, not only the causation, but also the historical effects or longer-term impact, of the Third Reich. Since the 1960s there have been discussions about whether the Nazis actually played an important role in putative processes of 'modernization' in twentieth-century Germany.

A further twist to previous debates has been given by developments since 1945. Long-term explanations of the allegedly inherent instability of German history, culminating in the Nazi catastrophe, were faced with the extraordinary success and stability of the Federal Republic. What had become of the supposedly irredeemable German national character? Moreover, there was in a sense a double problem: for, in a very different way, the German Democratic Republic proved to be one of the most stable and productive states in the area of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. Very often western historians chose largely to ignore the GDR, concentrating most attention on the liberal democracy of western Germany as the new 'culmination' of German history. Even so, attempts to insert developments after 1945 into a longer view were problematic: basic repression in the police state of the East, the allegedly clear superiority of the western system imposed on the West, were to a large extent the underlying premises

of Anglo-American interpretations of postwar German history, while Germans themselves (East and West) were caught in the problematic of the morally and politically loaded evaluation of competing systems. In the context of the Cold War there was a tendency on both sides of the Iron Curtain simply to castigate the other system in terms of one's own values, rather than exploring with sensitivity the actual mode of functioning and inherent problems of each system – a more nuanced approach which could easily be denounced as a form of fifth columnism.

There is now, too, a final twist to the problem. Any overview of German history must now explain, not only the relative stability – and apparent 'double solution' to the German problem – produced by the division of Germany, but also the dramatic historical transformation which occurred with the East German revolution in the autumn of 1989 and the unification of the two Germanies in October 1990. The years from 1945 to 1990 now form a clearly defined historical period. While there are particular debates about aspects of both West and East German history, scholars disagree about how, if at all, the two histories can (or on some views even should be) combined.[1] To present a coherent account of longer-term trends which culminate in the unification of the two Germanies in October 1990 is to enter into new historiographical terrain.

What then is the argument advanced in this book? Any narrative account is based on certain underlying assumptions about the relative importance of different factors. When dealing with large, complex patterns of historical development, and seeking to tease out the threads of continuity, dynamism and fundamental change, a certain intellectual order must be imposed on the mass of historical material. In the case of twentieth-century Germany we are dealing with an extraordinary succession of sociopolitical forms and yet also with some basic continuities. In my view, twentieth-century German history cannot be explained in terms primarily of personalities – whatever the undoubted importance of the actions and intentions of certain individuals, most notably of course Adolf Hitler – nor in terms of global, impersonal forces, whether to do with 'national character', 'cultural traditions', or any form of long-term structural determination. The account developed here is premised on the assumption that there is a complex interplay between a number of factors, and that human beings have to act within the constraints of given circumstances: both external structural and cultural conditions and 'internal' limits posed by their own views, knowledge and assumptions.

In seeking to explain patterns of stability and change special attention has to be paid to: Germany's place in the international system; the roles, relationships and activities of different elite groups; the structure and functioning of the economy; the location and aims of

dissenting groups; and what may loosely be called the patterns of political culture among different subordinate social groups. Clearly one cannot simply write an abstract formula of this sort, apply it to different historical periods, weigh up the equation, and produce a neat outcome. History is not as straightforward or mechanical a process as that. But when considering the period from 1918 to 1990 the formula just presented does appear to have remarkable explanatory power, as we shall see in more detail in the chapters which follow. Let me preview briefly some of the implications of the elements involved.

The 'land in the centre of Europe' has been intimately affected by, as well as affecting, the international balance of power. Germany played a major role in causing the outbreak of the First World War; but the Treaty of Versailles, particularly in the ammunition it gave to revisionist elements in Germany, also played a role in the causation of the Second World War. However much the latter conflict was Hitler's war, it was also in many respects a continuation of the previous conflict, or of the attempted resolution of that conflict. Defeat in the Second World War was the precondition for the division of Germany – a division that was, however, also predicated on the new Cold War that had arisen between two superpowers who had largely been drawn into European affairs as a result of German aggression. Finally, it was the end of the Cold War, initiated by a crumbling Soviet Union, that was the precondition for the end of the division of Germany. German history cannot be understood without reference to the wider international context.

But nor can it be explained solely in terms of that wider context. Clearly, at every stage the balance of domestic forces played a major role in the pattern of developments. And here we come to the set of domestic factors mentioned above. First, there is the issue of the roles and relations of different elite groups within any particular political system. When elites fail to sustain that system – as in the Weimar Republic – it has little chance of success. When elites condone it, or acquiesce in it – however apparently unjust the system may be – then it has less chance of being brought down by internal unrest. This proved to be the case, in rather different ways, in both the Third Reich (where elite resistance was belated and unsuccessful) and the GDR for a considerable period of time. In the latter case, semi-critical members of the intelligentsia, for example, were in the end accused of having helped to sustain the regime. Interestingly, the speed of the ultimate collapse – effectively a capitulation in the face of mass protest – of the GDR regime had much to do with dissension within the ruling Communist Party itself as to the best way forward out of a crisis. By contrast, when a variety of elites in the main support a given political system, then it is much easier to maintain stability

(provided of course that other factors are favourable). Thus, much of the success of the Federal Republic could be explained in terms of the support for West German democracy (in contrast to that of the Weimar Republic) on the part of the vast majority of political, economic, moral and intellectual elites.

The issue of elite support is a complex one, with cultural and moral elements involved as well as material factors. But the latter certainly play an important, indeed major, role, and need to be singled out for attention in respect of implications for popular as well as elite responses to the regime. Industrial and agrarian elites will clearly prefer a political system that appears to work to their economic advantage – again, contrast the critiques of Weimar democracy on the part of certain hard-pressed sectors of business and owners of impoverished, indebted agrarian estates, with the support for West German democracy among thriving industrialists and the well-represented farming lobby. At the level of mass politics, too, material success is important. Most ordinary working people will for obvious reasons tend to prefer a political system that appears to deliver the material goods. The importance of rapid economic growth for the anchoring of democracy in the early years of the history of West Germany cannot be overstated. Basic material satisfaction need not however be of this standard to ensure a more negative, but no less important, outcome: the *lack* of mass support for political opposition movements. At a rather basic level, people are less likely to rise in protest against an unjust and repressive system if the risks of rising are not counterbalanced by the pressures of acute material distress: consumerism is always a technique for rulers in repressive regimes to seek a modicum of popular quiescence. ('Bread and circuses' policies are as old as Roman civilization.) This was the case in the peacetime years of the Third Reich: mindful of the need to sustain his personal popularity or 'charisma', on which the political system of the Third Reich was so dependent, Hitler had constantly to balance considerations of consumer satisfaction with the economic imperatives entailed by preparations for war. Similar considerations were pertinent again for much of the1960s and 1970s in the GDR, when a combination of limited pride in economic achievements, stress on social policies and eventual consumer satisfaction, and hopes that hard work might bring a better future, helped to remove any potential mass support for the more ascetic programmes of dissident intellectuals. In contrast, much of the political turbulence of both the early and the later years of the Weimar Republic had to do with acute material distress for large numbers of people, hit either by catastrophic inflation or by the fear or reality of rising unemployment. This led to the willingness of large numbers to countenance radical political movements – of the Left or Right – claiming to offer some form of future salvation.

Finally, there is the key issue of political dissent and opposition, and of patterns of political culture under given circumstances. It is important for regime stability that political dissent be contained within certain bounds, and that it does not develop into broad, proliferating movements of opposition with mass followings. There are a variety of ways in which this containment may occur: through general satisfaction, for example, squeezing dissenters to a marginal fringe; through massive repression and intimidation, effectively excluding dissent from any articulate body politic; through isolation and limited toleration, allowing controlled ventilation of grievances; and in many other ways. The Weimar Republic was subjected to sustained assaults from a variety of quarters, from Left and Right; it ultimately fell prey to the latter, and its successor regime dealt exceedingly brutally with opposition from the former. The Third Reich itself was ultimately only felled from without because of lack of effective opposition from within. For much of the GDR's history it proved possible to contain and isolate intellectual dissent. But for a variety of reasons, dissent was able to proliferate in East Germany in the course of the 1980s, providing the foundation for the broad-based pressures on the regime in the situation of crisis which was inaugurated by Hungary's opening of the Iron Curtain and the ensuing flood of refugees in the summer of 1989. Clearly, again, no simple formula will adequately summarize the range of approaches, views and ideals of different groups of dissenters at different times. The character of dissent is affected by inherited cultural traditions as well as institutional and other structural circumstances. But it in turn can closely affect patterns of historical change. Thus, for example, the non-violent dissent shaped under the protection of the East German Protestant churches in the 1980s played a key role in the 'gentle' pattern of the East German revolution, and was a very different phenomenon from earlier 'revolutionary' movements in twentieth-century Germany.

Of course this set of factors cannot in any simple way unlock the course of history: there is a role for chance, for accident, for unforeseen combinations of circumstances, for the impact of personality. It must be the task of a narrative account to bring into play, at each turning, the role of specific elements in the actual pattern of events. But I would contend that the elements briefly introduced here together provide a useful framework for interpreting and seeking to explain the turbulent, often tragic, course of twentieth-century German history. In the chapters which follow, their implications at each stage will be explored in more detail. Let me conclude this chapter by outlining the structure and organization of the book.

The subtitle of this book is *The Divided Nation*. Germans in the twentieth century have been 'divided' in at least three different, but

interrelated, ways. Most obviously, Germany itself was divided after the war: what remained of Hitler's defeated Reich became two German states, truncated parts of a German nation. This was integrally related to the failure, before 1945, to resolve the problems and tensions of a divided society: tensions which by the end of 1932 had led to near civil war conditions, and which Hitler's enforced creation of a 'national community' merely exacerbated and displaced. Under Hitler, there were divisions between those accepted as 'folk comrades' and those rejected as 'community aliens'; there were also divisions within people themselves, between public and private selves, between conformity and distance, in psychological compromises made in order to survive through a dictatorial regime. Finally, the consciousness of the century itself is divided: by the historical caesura of 1945. For a long time 1945 appeared to be a moment when the 'unmasterable' past seemed to have ended, and the apparently eternal present began. A form of consciousness developed which had serious difficulties in connecting the past with the present, that which had been swept away before and that which had been built up after the 'Zero Hour' (*Stunde Null*) of 1945. Only recently have many Germans sought – in convoluted and problematic ways – to reappropriate and 'normalize' the recent past, to recognize lines of continuity as well as change between the periods before and after 1945. This deep caesura is also finally being overcome in historical accounts, with historians increasingly crossing the divide of 1945 and entering territory previously allotted to political scientists and sociologists.

This book seeks to confront and make connections across these forms of division. It traces the ways in which the problems and conflicts of the Weimar Republic and Third Reich appeared, in very different ways, to have been resolved in the apparently more stable postwar era of divided Germany. It seeks, too, to consider continuities across the abyss of 1945, and to locate the admittedly irreducible evil of the Third Reich in the realities and normalities of the longer sweep of twentieth-century German history.

The book is organized in two main parts. Part I traces the descent of a divided society into the Nazi abyss. Chapters analysing the tensions and strains which led to the collapse of Weimar democracy (chapters 2 and 3), are followed by two chapters (4 and 5) on the Third Reich in the peacetime and wartime years. In contrast to a number of brief overviews of the Third Reich, a relatively large amount of space is allotted to the issue of the 'Final Solution'. It may, with some justice, be asserted that an undue proportion of this text deals with the Holocaust; but given the pivotal role that the Holocaust plays in all popular prejudices about German history, as well as the major difficulties it has caused for the self-understanding, self-representation, and national identities, of postwar Germans – in

different ways in East and West – it seems important to give the actual course of events and the difficulties of their explanation a lengthier, more explicit hearing than merely the customary paragraph or two embedded in a wider narrative of the war that is usually found in general histories.

Part II then explores the extraordinary historical experiment of the divided nation. Three chronological chapters (6, 7, 8) are followed by four thematic chapters (9, 10, 11, 12) exploring certain aspects of the two Germanies in more depth. While the economic development of the two Germanies and the question of inner-German and foreign relations are dealt with in the three narrative chapters, which establish a basic chronological framework, the focus in the thematic chapters is primarily social, political and cultural (in a broad sense, including issues of political culture). There is inevitably a (hopefully minimal) degree of repetition across chapters, but by treating certain themes analytically an interpretation of the dynamics of development of the two Germanies may be developed, exploring the degrees and nature of their divergence, and elucidating the background to the East German revolution of autumn 1989. This revolution, and the radical historical transformation it inaugurated, forms the subject of chapter 13.

In Part III, chapter 14 briefly surveys the new social and political landscape of the Berlin Republic, formed out of the incorporation of the 'five new Länder' (or the defunct GDR) in an enlarged Federal Republic, and sketches some of the complex ways in which the doubly dictatorial past of Germany was reconceived after unification. Finally, a concluding chapter engages directly with the issue of the historical divide, the pivotal date of 1945. It reflects more broadly on the major patterns of development recounted in preceding chapters, and proposes a general framework for interpretation of the course of twentieth-century German history.

The book seeks, ultimately, to present in a readable and intelligible compass an account of some of the major currents of twentieth-century German history in the light of wider debates and controversies.