# West Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany was born in 1949 from the rubble of Hamburg and Frankfurt and other parts of what was once the *Deutsches Reich.* Among scholars, West Germany's "economic miracle" has become a cliché. We focus here less on the country's industrial resurgence than on the society that produced it—and the new society that it made possible. Success creates its own problems. Below, historian Konrad Jarausch recalls the West's long love-hate relationship with the German people; journalist David Binder looks at the legacy of World War II and the evolution of the modern Federal Republic; and historian David Schoenbaum analyzes West Germany's peculiar international position. For the first time in the country's history, he writes, its people have a stake in the status quo.

## PERCEPTIONS

*by Konrad H. Jarausch*

In 1944, historian A. J. P. Taylor was commissioned by British officials to write a chapter for a book about Germany that would "explain to the conquerors the sort of country they were conquering." When Taylor's essay was rejected as "too depressing," he penned an even more impassioned statement.

"The history of the Germans," Taylor began, "is a history of extremes. It contains everything except moderation, and in the course of a thousand years the Germans have experienced everything except normality. . . . They have produced the most transcendental philosophers, the most spiritual musicians, and the most ruthless and unscrupulous politicians. . . . Only the normal person, not particularly good, not particularly bad, healthy, sane . . . has never set his stamp on German history."

One need not subscribe to this tendentious assessment to recognize that perceptions of Germany, among Anglo-Saxon peo-

ples generally (and particularly among the British, who for 150 years have claimed a special insight into the German soul) have likewise embraced incompatible extremes. An opinion survey taken in 1942, as the Battle of the Atlantic raged, found that Americans regarded the Germans as "warlike" (68 percent) but also "hard-working" (62 percent), "treacherous" (43) but "intelligent" (41), "conceited" (33) yet "progressive" (31).

Ever since Coleridge and the romantics (and, later, Arnold) "discovered" German *Kultur*—the world of Goethe and Schiller, Mozart and Beethoven—and introduced it into polite drawing rooms, the pendulum of Anglo-American opinion on Germany has swung from worship through apologia to condemnation and back.

In the United States, another factor variously tempered or reinforced both popular and scholarly opinion. Unlike Britain, where the influx of Germanic peoples had largely ceased after the barbarian invasions, America opened its doors to millions of German immigrants during the 19th and 20th centuries. Between 1820 and 1950, some seven million Germans came to the United States—more than any other group. While Thomas Carlyle in England could assert that his countrymen and the Germans still shared "the same old Saxon spirit," only in the New World did anything like real affinity develop. There was also a certain ambivalence, associated less with personal impressions of the Germans as a people than with their behavior as a nation.

Germany did not become an integrated sovereign state until 1871, and it is difficult to say just when "German history" began. Various Germanic tribes had settled in central Europe before the time of Christ, and most of them lived free of the Roman yoke. It took some time for Christianity to penetrate the Teutonic hinterland, becoming, thanks to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, something else for the numerous German duchies, kingdoms, and principalities to fight about. For a thousand years, what is now Germany was under the transnational umbrella of the Holy Roman Empire, whose extent, composition, and cohesion varied over time. Only the rise of the kingdom of Prussia during the 17th and 18th centuries provided

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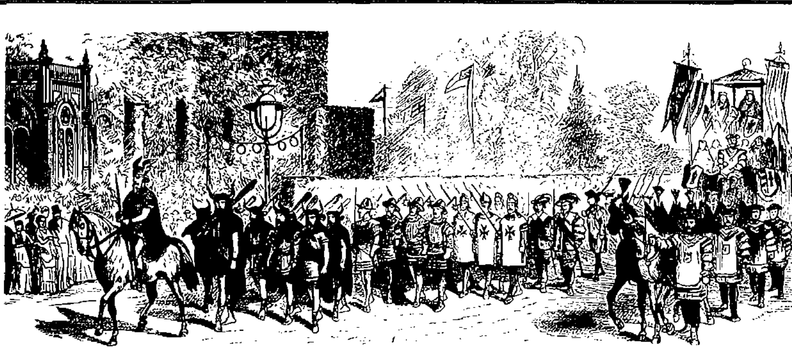


Courtesy of Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

*Nineteenth-century German immigrants parading in New Jersey. One out of six newcomers to America between 1820 and 1980 was a German.*

a stable nucleus around which the German state could eventually form.

From Queen Victoria to Napoleon III, through diplomacy or war, the rulers of neighboring lands were heavily involved in Germany's evolution. But in the minds of most Americans, Germany remained half a world away. Three great waves of German immigrants, not concern for the balance of power, shaped initial public impressions of the German character.

The 13 Mennonite families who arrived on the *Concord* at Philadelphia in 1683 heralded a migration of Southwest German peasants to the New World seeking land and religious freedom. These were the "Pennsylvania Dutch" (for *Deutsch*), whose descendants still farm the Middle Atlantic states, from southern Maryland to New York. The newcomers seemed quiet and sturdy, if strongly sectarian and somewhat aloof. Among others, Benjamin Franklin admired them for their "habitual industry and thrift."

In contrast to these drab "grays," as they were called, came thousands of "greens," political refugees of Germany's failed 1848 revolution. Led by the dynamic Carl Schurz, later a U.S. Senator and Secretary of the Interior, the "greens" established German churches, colleges, and newspapers (in 1884, there were 84 German-language daily newspapers in the United States) and campaigned for the new Republican Party, congenial to their own liberalism.

The final wave, coming after the Civil War, was the biggest. Driven by poverty and industrialization, millions of rural and urban poor from northwest Germany streamed across the Atlantic and settled in the great Midwestern cities: Cincinnati, Cleve-

land, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis. They were hard-working and mechanically adept—think of Weyerhauser, Westinghouse, Chrysler, Steinway. This group also prospered, much to the resentment of the less-affluent Irish and the Italians. Their more puritanical neighbors may occasionally have been upset by brass bands parading down the street, yet according to a study by journalist Norbert Muhlen, the most frequent adjectives used in the English-speaking press to describe the German émigrés were "calm, moderate, hardy, staid, brave, kindly, quiet, domestic."

Among educated Anglo-Americans, Germany had a more lofty connotation, at once romantic and scholarly. In 1815, Harvard theologian Edward Everett, Germanicist George Ticknor, and philologist George Bancroft all went to study at Göttingen, the first of a growing stream of American researchers (a total of 10,000 by 1900) attracted by the academic freedom, scientific achievement, and unfettered student life of German universities. "I think the Germans have an integrity of mind which sets their science above all others," Ralph Waldo Emerson observed. The Americans were quick to bring German innovations back to the United States: The notion of graduate education, for example, was transplanted to Johns Hopkins in 1876.

### From Bismarck to "Kaiser Bill"

Through much of the 19th century, most Americans tended to flavor their opinion of faraway Germany with their impressions of the Germans they knew. Diplomatic contacts—or contretemps—between the United States and the German Confederation were few. During the war against Denmark in 1864 and the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, American sympathies, insofar as anyone could tell, were with Prussia, which held out the promise, according to the *New York Tribune*, of "progress and the possibility of freedom and national growth." Similarly, during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), Americans generally sided with Bismarck against Napoleon III, whose attempt to install his protégé, Maximilian I, as Emperor of Mexico in 1864–67 roused politicians' ire north of the Rio Grande.

There was a palpable decline in admiration for the Germans after the Prussian victory over France at Sedan in 1870, the final unification of Germany, and the proclamation of a Kaiser (Wilhelm I). The new French Third Republic drew a groundswell of American support. In official Washington, there was concern as Germany moved, like the United States, to become a colonial latecomer in the Far East, daring to covet many of the same

prizes sought by American expansionists—Samoa and the Philippines, for example. Kaiser Wilhelm II, cursed by an erratic personality, embittered by the paralysis of his left arm, and utterly lacking in the diplomatic finesse of Bismarck (whom he dismissed as Chancellor in 1890), was ripe for caricature.

### Rehabilitating the Underdog

Yet American academics still admired German scholarship (despite a slow turning of the intellectual tide against Germany in England), and ordinary folk in the United States continued to esteem their German-American compatriots.* Not until the last prewar years did cautionary works such as Roland G. Usher's *Pan-Germanism* (1913) begin to appear in the United States. As the European war began, Americans regarded their German-American neighbors with sympathy rather than suspicion. There are few today who remember to what extraordinary lengths President Woodrow Wilson had to go to turn American sentiment against Germany. British propaganda was helpful. So were the blunders of the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, and Turkey): their violation of Belgian neutrality; their clumsy espionage in the Western Hemisphere; and their dramatic sinkings of transatlantic liners such as the *Lusitania,* with many Americans lost at sea.

America's entry into World I temporarily shattered the century-old friendly stereotype of the German in the United States. Sauerkraut became "Victory cabbage," and Germantown, New Jersey, was renamed Oldwick. Germans became "Huns"—an epithet ironically coined by Wilhelm II himself in 1900 when he exhorted a German expeditionary corps en route to China to be "as terrible as Attila the Hun." American intellectuals, even including such iconoclasts as Thorstein Veblen, volunteered for the propaganda effort; they produced earnest screeds whose scathing assessments of the German national character were buttressed by selective quotations from the works of such men as Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. "It was popularly believed," historian J. G. Gazely later wrote, "that every Frenchman was naturally and inherently a hero, and every German instinctively and unalterably a baby killer."

What is surprising is not that Germany got a bad press from

*The English, of course, were far more sensitive than the Americans to the implications of a united Germany for peace on the continent. Yet, even as war approached, British scholars retained their fascination with German history and their admiration for German scholarship. Both are evident, for example, in the 1910 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

its Anglo-American adversaries during World War I but that its image was later so quickly rehabilitated, in both scholarly and popular circles. On both sides of the Atlantic, the Weimar Republic (1918–33) appeared as a promising new experiment in democracy. "In innocence," historian Henry Cord Meyer later recalled, "we evidently presumed that with militarism defeated and the Kaiser gone the Germans would build a good middle-class republic not unlike our own." The diffusion throughout the West of Weimar cultural modernism—Bauhaus architecture, for example, and the plays of Bertolt Brecht—restored Germany to the affections of America's intellectuals.

### The Muses Flee

A wave of revisionist scholarship during the 1920s (e.g., *The Origins of the World War* by S. B. Fay) also prompted second thoughts on where the blame lay for starting the Great War. Russian mobilization and French revanchism, as well as sheer British antagonism, now took their place alongside German bellicosity as the war's "causes." French President Henri Poincaré's sudden military occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 made Germany now appear as the victimized underdog. An Anglo-American sympathy for "our German cousins" began to reassert itself.

Even as the worldwide Great Depression threw millions of Germans out of work, few observers anticipated the imminent disintegration of the Weimar Republic or the growing popular resentment against industrial barons (such as Hugo Stinnes) and Germany's rigid class structure. Despite the growing conflict between Left and Right, the increasing virulence of German anti-Semitism, and the country's acute economic distress, Americans were unprepared for the triumph of Adolf Hitler and National Socialism in 1933.

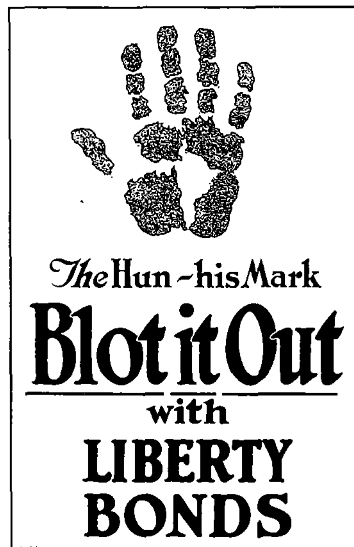
The Third Reich (1933–45) initially aroused more curiosity than condemnation in the United States. Impressed by the discipline and dynamism of the New Order as manifested in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, many Americans (and Britons) believed that one could at least "do business" with Hitler, whatever his faults. Lloyd George and Charles Lindbergh positively admired the man. Though appalled by the enthusiasm for the Führer shown by the brown-shirted German-American Bund, U.S. newspapers were divided on the wisdom of "interfering" in Europe once again in the event of another war.

American attitudes were fundamentally confused. Isolationism was widespread on the American Right, while the Left loudly denounced both German fascism and any effort at U.S.

rearmament. The communists opposed nazism—until Stalin's 1939 pact with Hitler. American Jews watched with growing alarm as the 1935 Nürnberg racial laws were followed by the chilling *Kristallnacht* pogrom in 1938. The Northeastern "establishment," typified by President Franklin Roosevelt, was strongly Anglophile and imbued with a congenital distrust of "Prussian militarism."

Yet, throughout the 1930s, U.S. opinion of the German *people* remained remarkably steady. A December 1939 Office of Public Opinion Research poll found that some 66 percent of the respondents regarded the Germans as "essentially peace-loving and kindly" while only 19 percent believed the Germans to have "an irrepressible fondness for brute force and conquest." Even the "Flight of the Muses" from Hitler's storm troopers—the exodus of thousands of Germany's most creative scientists, artists, and intellectuals to the New World—seemed, ironically, to have had largely a *positive* impact on American opinion of Germans generally: It was a tragedy that they had to flee in the face of anti-Semitism and totalitarianism, yet the very struggle of such men as Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann against the depredations of nazism testified to the existence of another, more civilized Germany. What animosity later developed toward the Germans was superimposed upon earlier, happier views.

Hitler's declaration of war against the United States in De-




*The Allied propaganda effort during World War I proved to be a boon for the poster industry. U.S. public opinion swung sharply against Germany, then, after the Armistice, became less hostile.*

cember 1941 marked the beginning of a strange golden age for students of Germany of every stripe. For a time, it seemed, the public appetite for books and pamphlets on the subject, ranging from the most obvious propaganda to solid scholarship, was insatiable.

While journalists poured out a stream of invective to strengthen American morale, numerous scholars explored the German character *From Luther to Hitler* (William M. McGovern), examined *The Rise of Metapolitics from the Romantics to Hitler* (Peter Viereck), and sought *The Roots of National Socialism* (Rohan Butler) in the legacies of Frederick the Great and Bismarck. The chief flaw in such books was a shared assumption that the "German problem" could be explained only if one conceded that the Germans, as a people, had somehow been abnormal from the start. Not all historians or political scientists agreed; the war years also saw more sophisticated (and less faddish) reflections on the origins of nazism by such scholars as Konrad Heiden, Franz Neumann, William Langer, and Raymond Sonntag.

### Germans as Americans

It was not until after V-E Day, with the revelations—and sickening pictures—of the nazi death camps, that a reflexive wave of revulsion passed over the United States and the rest of the world that would forever darken the German image. Allied leaders, including U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, seriously considered carving Germany into a handful of small states and, at the very least, "deindustrializing" the country—forcibly converting it into an agrarian nation.

Yet, in the immediate postwar period, Germany—more properly, West Germany—was gradually transformed from conquered enemy to valued ally. Prompted by Russian belligerence and the emergence of a Cold War, Washington shifted its emphasis from "collective guilt" to the economic and industrial reconstruction of Germany via the Marshall Plan (in which Moscow would not allow East Germany to participate). For the West, the psychological turning point came in 1948 when the "brave, freedom-loving Berliners," with the help of a massive U.S. airlift, successfully resisted the Soviet blockade of the former capital.

In the three decades since the creation of the Federal Republic in 1949, American perceptions of West Germany have drifted toward a neutrality flavored by ambivalence. Germany is no longer a media favorite, even if many scholars would agree

with V. S. Pritchett that its destiny remains an enigma.

Superficially, the country is more familiar to more Americans than ever before. Millions of U.S. tourists have taken a Rhine cruise, hundreds of thousands of GIs have lived in military enclaves throughout West Germany, and tens of thousands of students and scholars, supported by the Fulbright Program and the German Academic Exchange Service, have studied at West German universities. Not a few Americans work for U.S. subsidiaries of such German firms as Siemens and Volkswagen. Americans are becoming aware of West Germany as a prosperous economic competitor and a strong, sometimes truculent ally.

All of this is new. Yet older fears and suspicions linger beneath official cheerfulness and cooperation. Stereotypes of the German abound, many of them once quite serviceable but most of them dating back to the Second World War or before. There is little appreciation in the United States of the extent to which German society is fundamentally different from what it was in 1925; of the degree to which the West Germans, uprooted by war, their political and cultural fabric utterly destroyed, set out to build something completely new; of the ironic tendency of this new society nevertheless to cherish the old traditions of "Germanness" for want of anything better, of postwar vintage, to put in their place.

Why is this so? To some extent, the passing of the émigré generation, marked symbolically by the death of Hannah Arendt in 1975, cut the living bond between America and Germany. West German prosperity has dried up the last trickle of transatlantic migration, notably the brief 1960s "brain drain." In a sense, too, Americans have come to see the prosperous Germans as Europe's "Americans"—and Americans are not terribly curious about Americans.

Whatever the cause, West Germany today summons up a kaleidoscope of vague images in American minds, some folksy, some still worrisome, but few of them bearing much relation to the reality of the Federal Republic in 1981—its diplomatic aims, its social tensions, its peculiar view of the world. In many ways, misperceptions are more dangerous than honest disagreements. And the consequences of a misunderstanding are always worst among friends.