

PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN
CIVILIZATION SERIES

The Nazi Revolution

Hitler's Dictatorship
and the German
Nation

Fourth Edition

Revised and Edited by

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY Boston New York

Senior Sponsoring Editor: Jean Woy
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Cover Design by Alwyn Velasquez, Lapis Design
Cover Image by Hubert Lanzinger, 1934, *Der Bannertraeger*
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Printed in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-76936

ISBN: 0-669-41694-0

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9-DH-00 99 98 97 96



Contents

Preface	ix
Chronology of Events	xi
Reference Maps: Germany Before and After World War I, 1914–1919	xiv
Hitler's Conquests, 1938–1939	xv
Introduction	xvii
I The Nazi Movement and German History	1
<i>Hans-Ulrich Wehler</i> The Case for Continuity	3
<i>David Blackbourn</i> German Peculiarity in Question	8
<i>Jürgen Kocka</i> The Theory of a <i>Sonderweg</i>	12
<i>Charles S. Maier</i> Differences or Deviance?	18
<i>Allan Mitchell</i> The Three Paradoxes of Nazism	23



Proclamation of the German Reich, 1871. This painting depicts William I being proclaimed Emperor of Germany in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. In the foreground is Otto Von Bismark, the architect of German unification. (Corbis-Bettman)

PART

I

The Nazi Movement and German History

Variety of Opinion

Many threads of development can be traced to the fact that Germany had never experienced a successful bourgeois revolution.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler

The real strands of continuity across the divide of the First World War can best be followed if we look at what did happen in Imperial Germany rather than at what did not.

David Blackbourn

On the whole the latest comparative research on the bourgeoisie has substantiated the essence of the Sonderweg thesis.

Jürgen Kocka

It seems clear that the Sonderweg concept as originally formulated can no longer serve.

Charles S. Maier

What separated Germany was that so much of the potential for fascism became actual.

Allan Mitchell

We begin with a cluster of writers who attempt to locate the Nazi years within the long course of German history. Obviously Nazism was related to Germany's past as well as to its future, but precisely what was the nature of that relationship? For such a complex problem, as these historians testify, simple answers will not suffice.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler draws a straight line from the autocratic regime of the German Kaiserreich, established in 1871, to the onset of Nazi dictatorship. He sees Germany as a land without a democratic revolution, and he emphasizes an unbroken tradition of elitism that allowed modernization but maintained the iron discipline of the imperial state until the military defeat of 1918. Thereupon the old political leadership was temporarily displaced, but the economic and social power of the elites remained unshaken. They merely resorted to more clever manipulations during the interim of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933). Meanwhile, Wehler argues, genuine democratic reform was blocked and outdated reactionary institutions stayed in place. When the crisis of the Great Depression struck Germany with full force about 1930, therefore, the Republic was unable to cope and the Nazis stepped forward. In all of this, Wehler stresses, there was a distinct continuity.

David Blackbourn takes exception to Wehler's categorical portrayal of political manipulation by the old elites, and he challenges the neat theory of continuity. He charges Wehler with overstating the peculiarity of German history by assuming that it deviated from a "normal" path of democratic development on the British model. In reality, Blackbourn contends, Germany resembled other Western countries in its general tendency toward a modern bourgeois industrial capitalism. In this respect the only real difference was that Germany went farther — ultimately much farther — in the direction of fascism.

Jürgen Kocka directly addresses the Sonderweg theory. Some speculation about the separate path of Germany's development actually began well before the First World War. Since then it has undergone a number of permutations. Kocka recognizes various weaknesses of this thesis, and indeed he defines four telling criticisms of it. But he nonetheless remains convinced that an emphasis on the peculiarities of Germany's history represents the soundest approach to the study of Nazism.

Charles S. Maier is less persuaded that the Sonderweg thesis can survive the withering fire to which it has been submitted. To be sure, he acknowledges that certain forms of the German political and social structure were distinctive. Yet he returns to the underlying similarities

among European nations, of which Germany was not alone to display authoritarian traits.

Allan Mitchell adds a brief comment in hopes of clarifying the central issues of this debate. Three paradoxes are proposed that may not be as self-contradictory as they seem at first glance. Maybe there is a middle way between advocates and adversaries of the Sonderweg thesis. In any event, we may conclude that the power and resilience of the German nation have been major components of European history throughout the twentieth century, and the Nazi period must consequently be viewed within that larger context.

These five statements supply ample proof that our conceptions of the past are bound to change. As Nazism recedes into time, inevitably it comes to be examined in different perspectives. Even when moral judgment remains firm, historical interpretations must evolve.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler

The Case for Continuity

Many threads of development can be traced to the fact that Germany had never experienced a successful bourgeois revolution. This resulted in a lack of questioning and opening up, or at least loosening up, of traditional structures. The unbroken tradition of government by pre-industrial power-élites, the prolongation of absolutism among the military, the weakness of liberalism and the very early appearance of deliberalising measures suggest on the surface a depoliticising of society, but one which deep down favoured a continuation of the *status quo*. The same can be said of the barriers to social mobility, the holding over of differences and various norms between separate estates, which is such a revealing aspect of Imperial Germany, and the essentially élitist character of education. Much of this resulted from the political weakness and defeats suffered by the bourgeoisie in the

From Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. by Kim Traynor, 1985. Copyright © Berg Publishers, Ltd., 1985, New York/Oxford. Reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author.

nineteenth century, and all these factors, which are given here only as examples, had assumed their importance during a phase of historical development which was uninterrupted by a successful revolution. They were further strengthened by the success of Bismarck's policies for legitimising the *status quo*. This achievement did not preclude a partial modernisation of the economy, since after 1848 the strategy of "revolution from above" at first had the effect of strengthening the nascent industrial system. Nor did it rule out other achievements. Technical education was so well organised against the various efforts to resist its progress that the flow of scientific and technological innovations began relatively early on and was subsequently maintained. Many of the big cities profited from the retreat of liberalism's leading lights into local government, as well as from the bureaucratic tradition. It was not by chance that, after the 1890s, German local government, together with its communally-run public services, was regarded as a model by the American "progressives." While it is true that in 1895 more than 170,000 workers, punished as a result of their involvement in strikes, knew what it was to be on the receiving end of a system of class justice, the law nevertheless ensured a high degree of physical safety in the towns and rural districts. This was as true for workers and for members of national minorities, as for other social groups. Anyone who thinks highly of American party democracy should also look at the darker side of life in the United States — at, for example, the jungles of New York's immigrant quarters or the lynch justice of the South, to which for decades after the Civil War at least one Black per day fell victim. Party politics, lynch justice and life in the big cities may not appear commensurable with the above; but any comparing of systems inevitably draws upon positive or negative aspects of each, for which direct comparisons are difficult to find. In the German Empire it was not only discipline and repression which ensured social cohesion — whatever their undeniable effects, both subtle and obvious — but the conditions of everyday life. All protests to the contrary, the majority of Germany's citizens did not find these so oppressive that the crises of the Empire developed into a revolutionary situation before the war.

As regards the ruling élites' ability to adapt to changing circumstances, we must again enquire into the reasons for the system's relative stability, the traditional bases for which have been pointed out

several times. We can only say, in the language of modern theory, that "pathological learning" was in evidence in several areas. The retention or introduction of class-based electoral laws, the reaction to fundamental social conflicts and the creation of income taxes, the Zabern affair of 1913 or the belated repeal of the clauses on language in the Imperial Law of Associations in April 1917 — all reveal, even if measured solely in terms of a pure self-interest in upholding the system, such an extreme narrow-mindedness that Bethmann Hollweg's judgement would seem to be borne out. History, his associate, Riezler, recorded, would reveal "the lack of education, the stupidity of militarism and the rottenness of the entire chauvinistically minded upper class." This is what directly paved the way for the revolutionary crisis of 1918. In other areas where the élites endeavoured to hold on to their inherited positions of power, their successes outweighed the risks involved. There is no denying that the system of connections between the nobility, the ministerial bureaucracy, the provincial authorities and the district administrators — who were a veritable pillar of stability east of the river Elbe — created political tensions. But the myth of the bureaucracy's neutrality and the patina of inherited traditions, together with the preference shown to powerful interests, kept these below the danger-mark for a considerable time. Without doubt, the combination of compulsory military service with a social militarism in everyday life, in school subjects and in various organisations, created areas of friction. But the gains made in terms of the stability which these elements helped to achieve more than made up for this friction throughout the period up to and including the first years of the war. In both cases, it was not until November 1918 that the true extent of the population's strong dislike of the bureaucracy and the military could be seen.

Most effective of all, perhaps, were those strategies which, also depending on the ruling élites' capacity to learn, combined an ability to adapt to modern forms of politics and propaganda with, at the same time, a stubborn defence of their inherited positions of power. The unholy trinity of social imperialism, social protectionism and social militarism provides more than sufficient examples of this. In this case of social imperialism, the ruling élites' reaction to industrialisation was closely linked to its usefulness in stabilising the social and political hierarchy of privilege. In the case of social protectionist measures,

institutional arrangements of future import, such as state legislation on social insurance, were combined with welfare measures and rights which were not essentially liberal, but reactionary, so long as they led to an increase in the numbers of "friends of the Empire." In the case of social militarism, which was intensively encouraged, privileges of social status handed down from the past were defended by means of modern techniques of political campaigning pursuing carefully thought-out aims. The same is true of the early forms of state interventionism. Even a modern-style pressure group like the Agrarian League reveals quite clearly how this ability to adapt to modern methods of organisation and propaganda was entirely compatible with the continued promotion of traditional interests. All in all the entire process, which Hans Rosenberg has described as "the pseudo-democratisation" of the old agrarian elite, showed an often astonishingly flexible readiness on the part of the ruling élites to move with the times while all the more ruthlessly defending their traditional positions behind the façade.

All these strategies, measures and processes of pathological and ingenious learning were interwoven. Together with a combination of traditionalism and partial modernisation, they were able, on the one hand, to preserve the stability of an historically outdated power structure over a surprisingly long period. Time and time again they achieved the necessary social cohesion. On the other hand, they added, especially in the long run, to an unmistakably increasing burden. The various interests and traditions thus protected became all the more difficult to reconcile with the growing demands for equality, a share of power and liberation from an increasingly intolerable legacy. Just as the economic successes of German industrialisation threw up enormous social and political problems, so the successful defence of traditional political, social and economic power relationships exacted its price. The costs were all the greater and more numerous as a result. The accumulation of unsolved problems which eventually had to be faced, the petrification of institutions which had outlived their usefulness and were in need of reform and the obstinate insistence on prerogatives which should no longer have been the sole property of the privileged few, pronounce their own judgement on the extent to which the ruling élites were prepared to adapt. So do the continual recourse to evasive strategies and attempts to divert attention from the need for internal reforms, as well as the decision to accept the risk of

war rather than be forced into making concessions. In practice, the ruling élites showed themselves to be neither willing nor able to initiate the transition towards modern social and political conditions when this had become necessary. This is not a judgement based on theoretical speculation but on processes which culminated in the breakdown of the German Empire in revolution and the end of the old regime. This hiatus now belongs among the undisputed facts of history and cannot be explained away. It represented the bill that had to be paid for the inability of the German Empire to adapt positively to change.

The fact that this break with the past did not go deep enough and that the consequences of the successful preservation of outworn traditions remained everywhere visible after 1918, accounts for the acute nature of the problem of continuity in twentieth-century German history. Instead of bewailing "the distortion of judgement caused by the category of continuity," in arguments which patently seek to defend the German Empire's record, we should, in keeping with the essential requirements of an historical social science, face up to the problems of continuity and seek to analyse them further, rather than encourage an escapist attitude. This does not, of course, mean we should offer superficial explanations based on the "great men" approach to history (from Bismarck to Hitler via Wilhelm II and Hindenburg); rather we should investigate the social, economic, political and psychic structures which, acting as matrices, were able to produce the same, or similar, configurations over a long period of time. Conversely, we should also analyse those factors which gave rise to anomalies and discontinuity. The question as to whether, in fact, certain conditions favoured the emergence of charismatic political leaders in Germany should be re-examined against the background of these structures.

In the years before 1945, and indeed in some respects beyond this, the fatal successes of Imperial Germany's ruling élites, assisted by older historical traditions and new experiences, continued to exert an influence. In the widespread susceptibility towards authoritarian policies, in the hostility towards democracy in education and political life, in the continuing influence of the pre-industrial ruling élites, there begins a long inventory of serious historical problems. To this list we must add the tenacity of the German ideology of the state, its myth of the bureaucracy, the superimposition of class differences on those between the traditional late-feudal estates and the manipulation of

political anti-Semitism. It is because of all these factors that a knowledge of the history of the German Empire between 1871 and 1918 remains absolutely indispensable for an understanding of German history over the past decades.

David Blackbourn

German Peculiarity in Question

All national histories are peculiar, but some appear to be more peculiar than others. Few historians of modern Germany, whether native or non-native, can escape awareness of that. Historians of other countries are also engaged in some manner with examining national myths: 1688 and the English genius for gradualism, 1789 and the French revolutionary tradition, Easter 1916 and the Irish nationalist mystique. The work of revisionism, in each of these cases, has frequently been a matter of debunking, questioning the pieties of the myth, and pointing up its paralyzing as well as emancipating features. But post-war historians of Germany have seen themselves presented with a still more daunting task. They have been concerned not just with residual elements of myth, but with explaining why the course of German history led to 1933. . . .

What can be said about these ways of looking at the German past? First, of course, their questions and answers have produced much of the most illuminating work on modern German history during the last decades. In no way has the present essay sought to belittle these achievements. Secondly, these perspectives on the past are clearly not identical with each other. They emerged from different milieus and betray different casts of mind and temperament. In many points of detail and interpretation they would make odd, even incompatible, bed-fellows. But there are certain basic questions and answers which they

From David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Copyright © 1990 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

share. They view 1933 as the final outcome of a particular historical continuity; they see that continuity as the product of German peculiarity; and they see a crucial element of that peculiarity in the aberrant behaviour of the German bourgeoisie. While these approaches are therefore neither identical with each other, nor of course the only ones in which modern German history has been discussed, they nevertheless have sufficient common threads and sufficient stature to be worthy of critical attention. If there is a figure in the carpet it is German peculiarity, of which in turn the failure of the bourgeoisie to conduct itself like a "proper" bourgeoisie is a central motif. It is dissatisfaction with this way of looking at things that has prompted the present essay. . . .

I have also questioned the idea of "manipulation" with which historians have commonly described the cynical preservation of class interests (particularly those of a "pre-industrial élite"). This, once again, does not entail denying the elements of political dishonesty which characterized Imperial Germany; but it is easy to misidentify the range of would-be manipulators, and to approach the question of political manipulation itself one-sidedly. I am skeptical of accounts that depict the political process, in Gramsci's words, as "a continuous *marche de dupes*, a competition in conjuring and sleight-of-hand." It does greater justice to a complex historical process to recognize that if we are to talk of manipulation at all — and I prefer the term demagoguery — we should at least recognize that it was a two-way process which was politically unpredictable and potentially dangerous. This approach need be neither ingenuous nor "populist." The purpose of questioning the idea of manipulation by a particular élite is not to substitute a view that everything happened "from below" (which might be called the populist heresy), or that it happened because of the entry of "the masses" into politics (the older conservative orthodoxy). The intention here has been to try to add the missing dimension to accounts that habitually present the sound of only one hand clapping. Similarly, I have not sought to deny the elements of continuity that link the history of Imperial Germany with the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. It would hardly be necessary to make such a disclaimer, perhaps, had apologist historians not insisted on portraying the Third Reich as an "accident." The real question about continuity is not "whether" but "in which ways?" I have offered an implicit answer to the second of these questions by suggesting that we examine nineteenth-century



Pillars of the Reich. Hitler is shown at a Nazi party rally in 1934, flanked by members of his staff: (to his left) Julius Streicher, managing editor of *Der Stürmer* (The Fighter), the Nazi party newspaper; (to his right) Rudolf Hess, head of the political section of the party and third deputy of the Führer; Viktor Lutze, head of the SA following Röhm's death; and Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. (UPI/Corbis-Bettman)

Germany itself from a rather different perspective. This arises partly, of course, from a desire that Imperial Germany especially be treated less as a mere prelude to what followed. In terms of continuity, however, this could be put in more positive terms. To return to the open-

ing remarks of the essay, the real strands of continuity across the divide of the First World War can best be followed if we look at what did happen in Imperial Germany rather than at what did not.

Perhaps a final observation is called for on the dangers of complacency, moral as well as historical, if we insist too much on a certain kind of German peculiarity. While he was preparing *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann warned of creating "a new German myth, flattering the Germans with their own 'demonism'." Nearly forty years on, we see this problem at its most acute in the ephemera which has helped to establish the Third Reich as a macabre, but chic, chamber of horrors. That is what Hans-Jürgen Syberberg meant by referring to the Third Reich as "our Disneyland." Historians cannot dismiss this problem with an impatient gesture, for it raises moral implications for their own work. The charge of "trivializing" the Third Reich has been raised in recent acrimonious exchanges between historians of the 1930s, and the general issue is clearly present beneath the surface of the *Sonderweg* debate. My own view is that serious historians are perhaps most likely to "trivialize" modern German history in an involuntary manner: by exaggerated emphasis on the absoluteness of German peculiarity, which indirectly bolsters the morbid mystique of German history. There is a pedagogic, as well as a historical, argument for denting that mystique, just as there is a parallel case for not placing swastikas routinely on the covers of books dealing with twentieth-century Germany. That does not mean that we should write the history of Germany as if it were like the history of everywhere else; only that we should not write it as if it were quite unlike the history of anywhere else. The distinctiveness of German history is probably best recognized if we do not see it (before 1945) as a permanent falling-away from the "normal." In many respects, as I have tried to show, the German experience constituted a heightened version of what occurred elsewhere. This is true of Germany's dynamic capitalism, and of the social and political consequences it generated. It is true of the complex mesh of private and public virtues and vices which were characteristic of German bourgeois society. It is true of a widespread sentiment like cultural despair, and of the crass materialism which unwittingly reinforced it. It is true, I believe — although not all will want to accept this — of the way in which these and other phenomena discussed above combined to produce Germany's exceptionally radical form of fascism. What stamps

the German case as distinctive is, of course, the particular, uneven combination of these elements. This is not an attempt to smuggle peculiarity in again through the back door. As we have also seen, this unevenness of economic, social, and political developments was not in itself peculiarly German: Germany was much more the intensified version of the norm than the exception. That it so often appears exceptional probably owes a good deal to the distorting focus of a more acceptable myth — that of a benign and painless “western modernization.” There is much to be said for shifting our emphasis away from the *Sonderweg* and viewing the course of German history as distinctive but not *sui generis*: the particular might then help to illuminate the general, rather than remaining stubbornly (and sometimes morbidly) peculiar. That would be less likely to encourage apologetics than to disarm them. It might also enlarge rather than diminish our sense of modern Germany as a metaphor of our times. We recognize the richness of allusion when Walter Benjamin called Paris the “capital of the nineteenth century.” We should be similarly open to the full meaning of Germany as the “tragic land” of the twentieth century. Our historical and moral sense of that tragedy is sharpened, not blunted, if we decline to view it solely as the final culmination of German peculiarity.

Jürgen Kocka

The Theory of a *Sonderweg*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people were convinced of the existence of a special “German path” of development which set the Reich apart — in accordance with its particular

From Jürgen Kocka, “The German Identity and Historical Comparison: After the *Historikerstreit*,” in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past*. Copyright © 1987 by Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

geographic position and historical tradition — in a positive way from France and England. They regarded the nonparliamentary character of the German “constitutional monarchy” as an advantage. Many were proud of the strong government that stood above the parties, the respected and efficient German bureaucracy, and the long tradition of reforms from above which distinguished Germany from the Western principles of revolution, laissez-faire, and party government. German “culture” seemed superior to Western “civilization” — an ideology that culminated in the “ideas of 1914.” After the First World War, some scholars, like Otto Hintze and Ernst Troeltsch, began to relativize this positive variant of the *Sonderweg* thesis. After the Second World War it had ceased to be convincing at all. Since then, the idea of a positive German *Sonderweg* has played little role in comparative interpretations of German history.

After 1945, a liberal-democratic, critical version of the *Sonderweg* thesis emerged. Its progenitors included Friedrich Engels and Max Weber. Emigrés and other critics of National Socialism also played an important part in its formulation. The essence of this critical variant of the *Sonderweg* thesis was its attempt to explain why Germany, in contrast to other highly developed and comparable countries of Northern and Western Europe, turned to fascism or totalitarianism during the crisis of the interwar period. Identifying the causes of National Socialism became the central issue of historical interpretation. The new *Sonderweg* thesis embodied Germans’ attempt to explain “the German catastrophe” from a comparative perspective and to acknowledge it as an oppressive, yet undeniable, part of their historical heritage, while at the same time distancing themselves from it.

The great importance of short-term factors in the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism were, of course, not overlooked from this perspective. Who could possibly have disregarded the consequences of Germany’s humiliating defeat in World War I? It was also generally recognized that the difficulties of international economic relations between the wars and the Depression intensified the problems of the first German republic and ultimately contributed to Hitler’s rise.

Yet, at the same time, researchers looked back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to uncover the deeper roots of the Third Reich. Through comparisons with England, France, the United States,

or simply "the West," they attempted to identify the peculiarities of German history, those structures and processes, experiences and turning points, which, while they may not have led directly to National Socialism, nevertheless hindered the long-term development of liberal democracy in Germany and eventually facilitated the triumph of fascism. Many authors made various contributions to the elaboration of this argument, usually without actually using the word *Sonderweg*. . . .

Adherents of this interpretative approach naturally understood that the defeat in World War I and the 1918/19 revolution represented a deep break with the past and changed the inherited constellation of power in Germany. The traditional authoritarian state, the civil service, and the army lost much of their former legitimacy, the old elites were partially replaced, and a parliamentary democracy was erected. The labor movement was one of the winners in this process. The Social Democrats may have split, but they also gained power. The development of the welfare state made rapid progress. Yet in spite of all this, according to the *Sonderweg* thesis, many of the old problems remained and contributed to the special weaknesses of Weimar democracy. As a result, the Republic collapsed in the face of the Depression, whereas the more stable democracies of Western and Northern Europe survived.

As is well known, there is much to be said for this argument. Because parliamentarization had been hindered for so long, the new system — born of defeat — was not powerful enough to defuse the deep social tensions that emerged in the wake of war and economic turbulence. The core elements of the Wilhelmian party system were still in place after the revolution; the parties had not learned in time how to act in a parliamentary manner, how to accept the compromises necessary in a democracy. Traditional attitudes and elitist expectations remained characteristic among large segments of the upper class — among the Junkers, the upper bureaucracy, the officer corps, the judiciary, and portions of the bourgeoisie — and these traditional, pre-democratic, and in part premodern attitudes and claims increasingly conflicted with the realities of Weimar.

All of this explains why a substantial portion of the upper class was hostile to the new democratic republic and helped bring it down. Segments of the petty bourgeoisie also continued to direct their usual demands at the state. These demands turned into protests against the new political system once the republic showed itself incapable of pro-

tecting the lower middle classes against the challenges of modernization. Despite Berlin and the flourishing of modernism in Weimar, the illiberal elements of German political culture survived and gained in strength. In complicated and circuitous ways, it was the Nazis who benefited from this trend.

From this perspective, then, it was not only economic crisis, explosive class antagonisms, and the destabilizing consequences of modernization that brought on the crisis of Weimar. These "modern" factors were certainly important, but they were, after all, present also in other countries. In Germany, however, such factors were intensified by premodern structures and traditions which, though under attack, continued to make their presence felt. This was the legacy of the *Sonderweg*.

The multifaceted interpretation sketched out above (dubbed the "*Sonderweg* thesis" more often by its critics than by its supporters) has never enjoyed universal support. In recent years it has come under increasing fire. The chief objections can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. To view German history only in relation to 1933 (or 1933–45) is a one-sided approach. As National Socialism recedes ever further into the past, it becomes less and less reasonable to interpret German history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries principally in terms of Weimar's collapse and the triumph of Nazism. German history before 1933 is more than just a prelude to 1933. It is also part of the prehistory of 1988, for example; and moreover it is an epoch in its own right.

2. According to another objection, the notion of a German *Sonderweg* presupposes that a "normal" path of development existed, from which Germany deviated. If "normal" is taken to mean "average," "probable," or "most frequent," then it would be difficult to show that the French, English, or American patterns of development represented "normality" — completely leaving aside the fact that they are ill-suited to be lumped together in a single "Western" model.

If "normal" is meant in the sense of "norm," then the difficulties multiply. For if "the West" is taken as a normative standard from which Germany deviated to its own detriment, then this implies a subjective value judgment — and with it the danger of an idealization of "the West." This objection has gained in resonance as doubts increasingly arise concerning the Western model of modernization.

3. Recent empirical studies seem to show that the causal significance of premodern attitudes, structures, and elites for the crisis of the Weimar Republic has perhaps been exaggerated. Instead, greater emphasis is placed on the consequences of defeat and inflation, the world economic crisis, and the supposedly precipitous construction of a welfare state. Other authors have taken up an older line of argument and stressed that rapid modernization itself led to social and cultural *anomie* and tensions, which in turn intensified the Weimar crisis and destabilized the system. The failure of Weimar was thus the result of the “contradictions of classic modernism.”

4. Recent interpretations of the Wilhelminian Empire have strongly emphasized its modernity: its achievements in the areas of education, science, and architecture, its allegedly well-developed bourgeois character — in civil law, the press, the theater, and other areas of culture. In addition, a comparative approach appears to show that those characteristics long interpreted as the peculiar weaknesses of the German bourgeoisie — the influence of the aristocracy on the upper bourgeoisie, for example — were in fact phenomena shared across all European nations.

In light of these and other criticisms, the *Sonderweg* thesis must be rethought, made more precise, and partially modified. . . .

What is one to make, then, of the empirical objections to the *Sonderweg* thesis? First of all, no serious historian would argue that the peculiarities of German history led directly and of necessity to 1933. Without question, there were many additional causal factors — from the consequences of defeat to the personality of Adolf Hitler — and it might still have been possible to prevent the Nazi victory as late as the end of 1932. Nevertheless, the structures and processes identified in the *Sonderweg* literature intensified the difficulties of the Weimar Republic and facilitated the rise of the Nazis. Recent research has added new elements to the overall picture and shifted emphases, yet the broad outlines of interpretation have not been revised. The rejection of the Weimar Republic by broad sectors of the upper class, antidemocratic nationalism, the difficulties of the parliamentary system, the power of large landowners and the officer corps, illiberal elements of the political culture, the weakness of the democratic and republic camp: such factors help explain the collapse of the Republic and are themselves the product of preceding processes and structures identified by

the *Sonderweg* thesis. References to the “contradictions of classic modernism” fit well into the contemporary atmosphere skeptical of modernization, but other countries were also modern — and yet they escaped Germany’s fate.

In addition, much has changed over the past few years in the interpretation of the Wilhelmine Empire and, with it, a central element of the inherited *Sonderweg* thesis. The “feudalization of the upper bourgeoisie” turns out to have been much less advanced than had long been thought, and at any rate the close connections between upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy was a phenomenon common throughout Europe. The German middle class was indeed relatively weak in an economic and political sense when compared to its counterparts in the West, but in Germany as a kind of compensation, a precocious and strong bourgeoisie of culture and learning [*Bildungsbürgertum*] emerged. The continuing power of liberalism on the local level also made up to some degree for its weakness on the national level.

Other examples could also be mentioned, but on the whole the latest comparative research on the bourgeoisie has substantiated the essence of the *Sonderweg* thesis: there were peculiarities in the relationship between aristocracy and bourgeoisie which confirm the weaknesses of the German middle classes. The fairly marked differentiation of the bourgeoisie in Germany was a function of its relatively weak powers of attraction and integration. The many “unbourgeois” characteristics of middle-class society during the Wilhelmine Empire can be accounted for in this way. The bureaucratic tinge to German bourgeois culture also highlights one of its most painful limits.

Comparative research over the past several years has repeatedly confirmed this peculiarity — among others — of German development: the importance and continuity of a bureaucratic tradition. German development distinguished itself from that in both East and West by the presence of a precocious, efficient, respected, and influential professional civil service and a long tradition of successful reforms from above. A strong, authoritarian state emerged which achieved much and became the object of widespread, and not unjustified, admiration. But the price paid for this, in a certain sense, was the specific weakness of bourgeois-liberal virtues.

The bureaucratic tradition influenced many different spheres of life: the formation of classes and status groups, the educational system,

the structure and mentality of the bourgeoisie, the labor movement and the party system, the organization of large-scale industry, even the social theories of Max Weber. It facilitated the early development of a welfare state, but also helped to block the parliamentarization of the Empire and its member states up to 1918. The various social groups looked to the state for initiatives, and when these state-oriented expectations were disappointed they were easily transformed into protests directed at the existing system. The bureaucratic and authoritarian character of deeply rooted ideas, modes of behavior, and attitudes certainly helps to explain why there was so little resistance during the 1930s and 1940s to atrocities committed by the state.

Charles S. Maier

Differences or Deviance?

Is there any persuasive power left to the *Sonderweg*? If every nation has its own *Sonderweg*, deviant behavior is a meaningless concept. Still, as Jürgen Kocka has pointed out, among those countries with which Germans chose to compare themselves, Germany alone chose an authoritarian path. The Germans picked their own relevant universe of comparable countries — and diverged significantly. But even if the historian seeks to jettison the case-history approach, is there no valid model of German national development that explains the vulnerability to authoritarianism? Was Nazism, then, merely the contingent product of immediate political factors? Is German national identity to be pronounced unproblematic? Alternatively, was National Socialism an ailment of capitalism in crisis that happened to strike the country that had lost World War I and had been subjected to a humiliating peace treaty?

It seems clear that the *Sonderweg* concept as originally formulated can no longer serve. To adduce a stunted bourgeoisie or a middle class overawed by Junkers and military prestige will no longer adequately

From Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. Copyright © 1988 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

account for the annexationist fervor of 1914 or the vulnerability of Weimar democracy. Many historians will still object: Surely the Germany of 1914 relied more than other countries on military solutions, whether Bismarck's wars of unification or heavy-handed diplomatic pressure in the years before the outbreak of war. It took greater pride in military splendor, had its elites more attuned to drums and trumpets than inveterately civilian Britain. But even in this respect the comparison is less clear-cut than often remembered. If militarism seemed endemic within Germany — “Kennst Du das Land, wo die Kannonen blühen?” so Erich Kästner parodied Goethe in the 1920s — Englishmen outside their island exercised a military and racist domination throughout an empire extending from Ireland in the west to the Raj and Capetown and Hong Kong. Germany, it might be countered, was “authoritarian” and stratified. And yet Britain's class society was as profoundly elitist as Germany's. There was more velvet glove and less iron hand, but no bared arm. It is hard to find indices of German stratification and even of class arrogance for which Britain lacked equivalents. . . .

As Marc Bloch insisted fifty years ago, comparison involves establishing differences as well as similarities. Moving beyond the case-history approach should not preclude trying to understand real distinctiveness. The fact that German bourgeois achievements were long underrated does not mean that political life in Berlin was equivalent to that in London or Paris. Bureaucrats, the court, parliaments, and parties played different roles. Inherited titles conferred prestige everywhere, but the power they brought varied from country to country. Despite the battering that the *Sonderweg* thesis has undergone, despite the correct insistence that Germans enjoyed a vigorous civic life, political organization, and public debate, the countries were run differently. Paul Kennedy has updated the argument forcefully: “Whatever the area selected — controls by the representative over the executive, prerogatives of the monarch, role of the army, management of the economy, freedom of the press, supervision of the educational system — the German position was more authoritarian and state-directed.”

Kennedy's summary, however, slights the fact that the British elites neither desired nor required so assertive a state apparatus. The political conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ended by confirming that the British upper classes would govern their national society for their own benefit. Analogous crisis in Germany, especially

in Prussia, had a different outcome. Urban patricians and rural notables were overawed. They remained influential at the local level but were constrained to enroll as civil servants or army officers if they wished to play a national political role. The bargain was made attractive by affixing noble titles to state service and letting landlords have increased power over their local peasants and peasant lands. Subsequent chances to redress power relationships were not really exploited: hence the "failures" of liberalism in 1815, 1848, and 1862. As of the early twentieth century, the German parliament played less crucial a role, could not limit discretionary royal authority, and certainly emanated no executive power of its own. Political analysts believed the difference lay in the constitutional prohibition on Prussian/German cabinet officials' sitting in the Reichstag (hence belonging to a party coalition), but this was only one of several distinctions.

Perhaps the salient difference between the German regime and the others lay in the role of parties. . . .

German parties were certainly strong in terms of organization. They were ideologically coherent, they had important links with interest groups and newspapers, and their basic array survived the upheaval of 1918, if not of 1933 and 1945. But the historian must distinguish dimensions of strength: if cohesiveness was high, the passion to govern was low. When the parties inherited sovereign power in the debacle of November 1918, they were unprepared to exercise it. German party leaders had not wanted to rule per se. They wanted to be consulted, certainly sought policies favorable to their economic interests, and (especially in the case of the Catholics) insisted on recognition from government ministers that their support was indispensable. Success was measured by standing within the party organization, not domination of a national agenda. Parties served as transmission belts. Parliament confronted an executive that in theory was independent of the parties, even if they could make life difficult. The result, as Max Weber noted ruefully during World War I, was merely negative. England could be rightly termed a democratic state (*ein Volksstaat*); "whereas a parliament of the ruled that can exert only a negative politics with respect to a ruling bureaucracy represents the plaything of an authoritarian state." In England, access to government remained crucial. Parties aspired to decision-making power; their representatives constituted the executive. So, too, in France. If not permanent parties, major parliamentary coalitions demanded decisive power. The great clashes of the pre-1914 Third Republic involved issues laden with implications as to

who ruled — the church or the republic — and whose values would be hegemonic.

Another distinction potentially handicapped German parliamentarism. Its capacity to live with a majority of the left without a civil war or an authoritarian coup remained untested before the revolution of 1918. In Britain and France governing coalitions replaced each other according to electoral outcomes. Had the Labour Party or French Socialists emerged with decisive blocs of delegates before World War I, they probably would have been admitted to a share of cabinet power. In Germany electoral results did not mandate different coalitions. And the prospect of a majority dependent upon Social Democratic delegates appeared more frightening and might have triggered some sort of authoritarian coup. Nonsocialists accepted SPD power as a lesser evil in the revolution of 1918, but many of them preferred an authoritarian political solution rather than permit the party to play a leading role after 1930. The capacity of the German political system to allow for peaceful alternation of coalitions was precarious.

Stressing these impediments to democratization does not require endorsing a German *Sonderweg*. History sometimes repeats its opportunities. Setbacks are not always permanent. Parties and parliament would probably have acquired more power (if only by default) had World War I not suspended "normal" political conditions. Granted, every move toward "opening" — the effort to quash the Kaiser after the *Daily Telegraph* interview, the reformist electoral victories in the elections of 1912 — provoked a conservative backlash. Nonetheless, over the long term, a new political equilibrium that conceded more influence to a parliamentary majority and did not rely upon quarantining the SPD was certainly one plausible scenario. The *Sonderweg* approach, however, allows little scope for the transformative impact of what might be termed "normal crises." Every apparent reform becomes at best a pseudo-reform that only stabilizes the old elites.

The *Sonderweg* thesis, moreover, purports to explain political outcomes according to societal factors, and societal factors of a special sort. It implies that the flaws in German politics resulted from some deficiency in the society or underlying culture. Granted that German institutions differed from those in other Western countries, granted that they placed liberal-democratic outcomes under a greater handicap — did they differ because of proximate factors or did they differ because of "deeper" reasons? It is the search for allegedly more profound (or "structural") causes that distinguishes the analyses of Marx

and Engels, Weber and Veblen, and their recent heirs. The structural difficulties, moreover, are of a particular kind. The societal factors that allegedly have weighed so fatefully on German politics are the residues of an earlier, prebourgeois era.

The concept of the *Sonderweg* implies a theory of belated development. Other societies, which are viewed as normative, shed their feudal past through one form of bourgeois revolution or another. Not so the Germans. According to the scenario, the remnants of a premodern society of estates or *Stände* remained embedded in semimodernized form. Archaic guilds remained until the 1850s, then crystallized in public-law corporations, thus inhibiting the rise of a modern citizenry and producing petit-bourgeois chauvinists obsessed with status, as fictionally exemplified by Heinrich Mann's *Untertan*. The bourgeoisie won reserve officer status in the army by virtue of their education and internalized the rigid outlook of that antidemocratic caste. The East Elbian Junkers preserved outmoded rights of justice over the peasantry until 1872 and informal jurisdiction thereafter. In 1849 they extracted a skewed suffrage that enhanced their political preponderance in Prussia; and in 1878 they extracted a protectionist tariff that allowed them to remain on the land as feudal agrarian capitalists. The bureaucracy, with its dependence on the monarch and its life tenure of secure office, discouraged more meritocratic hierarchies. "No economic reasons are responsible for the political immaturity of the German bourgeoisie," declared Weber in his celebrated inaugural lecture of 1892. "The reason lies in its unpolitical past . . . And the serious question for the political future is whether it isn't now too late to catch up." In effect, the caterpillar of the old regime went into the cocoon of nineteenth-century social transformation and emerged . . . a fatter and more rapacious caterpillar.

What critics of the *Sonderweg* idea have objected to is the notion that a "backward" societal substructure inevitably led German politics to turn out so miserably. On the one hand, they argue, when German politics turned out badly it did so because of deficiencies at the level of politics alone: miscalculation, arrogance, hostility to compromise, narrow economic goals. A major piece of evidence in this regard is the new interpretation of the Weimar electoral returns: the voting results suggest that Nazism was a broad political protest, not the work of a frightened lower middle class. Second, the critics question the indices

of backwardness. Too many of Germany's urban dwellers formed political associations, organized, sought votes, read newspapers. Too many Junkers were deeply involved with banks and industries. Too few shopkeepers and small independent businessmen persisted to be a decisive influence on the grass-roots upheaval against the Weimar Republic. And to argue from the negative case, too many British shopkeepers had the same petit-bourgeois, often chauvinist mentality that identified with imperial success and kowtowed to social superiors. Why should the behavior in England known as "deference politics," which supposedly helped entrench parliamentary liberalism, be condemned as a prop of the *Obrigkeitsstaat* (authoritarian state) in Germany? The liberal societies were hardly free of premodern legacies (and at all levels of society). Each polity rested upon a cumulative sedimentation of social structures. Insofar as political patterns corresponded to social organization, they did not reflect any one level of social or economic development. Thus each nation's politics involved organizational forms, conflicts, rivalries, and outcomes that transcended any one-to-one determination by those elements.

Allan Mitchell

The Three Paradoxes of Nazism

No history of a modern nation arouses greater passion, or so much confusion, as that of Germany. To state the obvious: German history matters to all of us because it is a crucial aspect of *human* history; it is a part of everyone's past.

Yet the historical record, like our personal experience, is often muddled. While the scholarly debates rage on, students may be forgiven for wondering just where to begin in exploring issues of such infinite complexity. By some historians we are assured that the most appropriate starting point is a notion of Germany's "separate path" (*Sonderweg*). No comparable European nation produced an Adolf

Hitler, provoked a Second World War, and pursued a course of maniacal genocide. Surely, they argue in effect, the proof is in the pudding.

The validity of this thesis thus hinges directly on the stunning events that occurred during the twelve years of German history after 1933. True, no person can legitimately question the enormity of those events. But a nagging question remains whether they were the inevitable outcome of that history. A serious problem with the *Sonderweg* theory, in other words, is that it tends to remove contingency from history. Suppose Hitler had been killed, as well he might have been, during his 1923 Putsch in Munich. Would the dreadful developments that began to unfold a decade later necessarily have come to pass? And would we still be forced to acknowledge Germany's special status among European nations had the Weimar Republic survived?

Because no certain response to such imponderables is possible, we would do well to use caution as we roam in the valley between the imposing proponents of a *Sonderweg* and their no less formidable detractors. For our journey into German history we need some reliable signposts. Arguably there are three ahead, each of which may be read as a paradox:

1. *Germany's history was unique but not isolated.* To state that every European nation took a separate path to modernity may be a banality, but it is one that we should seriously take to heart. Doubtless German tradition was distinctive from any of its neighbors and competitors, but so was *their* individual history distinctive from others. Hence it is an absurd proposition that Germany was different from "the West" — as if the collective experience of the French was coterminous with that of the British, the Italians, the Scandinavians, or the Americans (not to mention regional differences within those vast populations). It only makes sense to view each of these historical and geographical units as a unique entity, and Germany as one among them. All passed along the same broad path to modernity, each in its own fashion, some more successfully than others.

This pluralistic conception need not beg the question of what was "modern" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With a greater or lesser degree of precision we can indicate what we mean by that term: democratic political forms of representative government, advancing technology and public transportation, industrialization and urbanization, a measure of social welfare with an organized medical profession,

corporate banking and business institutions, patronage of the arts and sciences, an elaborate system of schools and universities, a consequent rise in literacy, trade unionism, and so on. All the nations of Europe and North America shared in these developments, and Germany was no exception. Exceptional was solely the German variant, unique in degree but not in kind. If so, what we need to analyze is the peculiar chemistry of the German people, those ingredients that made them distinctive from others who were undergoing essentially the same evolutionary process.

2. *Nazism was not an exception but an exaggeration.* This second axiom logically follows from the first, and it contains two paradoxical corollaries. In the first place, Germany was not alone in succumbing to fascism, or at least in absorbing into its body politic certain fascist traits. Whether or not the early twentieth century can aptly be described as "the fascist epoch" (as does Ernst Nolte) is moot. But it is certain that traces of fascism and its ugly twin racism were everywhere to be found, not just in the obvious cases of Mussolini's Italy and Franco's Spain, but also in France, England, and the United States.

The second corollary, however, is that none of the other nations went so far in the implementation of a dictatorship. What separated Germany was that so much of the potential for fascism became actual. To grasp the phenomenon of Nazism, therefore, we need to examine those elements of the German pattern that allowed the general fascist surge to progress beyond the bounds of decency. Impediments to fascism did exist in Germany, as elsewhere, but they were decisively breached in 1933 and they crumbled in the Nazi torrent thereafter. Hence, willingly or not, the Germans faced the grim reality of a fascist state control that far exceeded any other in its ruthlessness and, ultimately, its destruction of innocent lives. Although deeply embedded in the general historical trends of the modernizing Occident, therefore, Germany's intense and devastating experience under Nazi rule will forever set its past apart from the rest of humanity.

3. *Nazism was an extraordinary episode but an integral part of European history.* As a new millennium opens, we are now able to look back at the entirety of the twentieth century. And in this retrospect, it is remarkable to observe how similar the balance of European power appears at the end of the century when compared to its outset. If, some years ago in the midst of the Cold War, one had assessed Europe's

condition, matters would have seemed otherwise. At that time Europe and, with it, Germany were divided, half dominated by the Soviet Union. But after 1989 a dramatic change occurred that revealed the enduring character of the European constellation. As it turns out, the primary fact of European history in the twentieth century (uncomfortable as it is for some to admit) has been the supremacy of Germany. Such a configuration was already evident by 1900 as a result of Germany's political unification and intensely rapid industrialization after 1870. While the Kaiserreich of that era bestraddled Central Europe, Russia (then as now) played the secondary role of a somewhat distant flanking power, usually considered by others to be backward and vaguely menacing. The other flank was occupied by Great Britain, as ever aloof but always an estimable factor in the European equilibrium — a part it continues to perform, despite a loss of empire, thanks to its atomic power and its special relationship to North America. Meanwhile, on the Continent itself there exists once more, as a century ago, a scene of muffled competition between France and Germany, in which the former is badly outmatched by its colossal Teutonic neighbor, again unified and thriving with unprecedented industrial might.

If this scenario is nearly accurate, then the essential (or, one may virtually say, normal) alignment of European nations in the twentieth century has revolved about the preeminence of Germany. The irrepressible vitality and sheer magnitude of the German nation, superior in strength to its rivals, are fundamental factors too often awkwardly avoided in discussions of the *Sonderweg* thesis. Withal, what we have witnessed in the century just past is an astonishingly powerful performance by a people that has suffered so much (often self-inflicted) adversity: the humiliating defeat of 1918 and the futile restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, the economic debacle of the Great Depression, the awesome physical destruction and complete moral bankruptcy of 1945, and the lengthy political division into two mutually hostile states dominated by foreign superpowers. Yet through it all Germany has somehow survived and indeed prevailed. Truth to tell, for better and worse, it has been the German century.

In this historical perspective the advent, course, and collapse of Nazism gain their full meaning. Nazism was no accident, no breakdown, no detour. It was in fact the most emphatic assertion of Germany's continental supremacy. The truly perplexing issue of twentieth-century

Europe, then, has not been the reality of German dominance but the means. By employing fascist methods imposed by military force, the regime of Nazi Germany became an outrage and an obscenity. No sane person can lament its demise. But that condemnation has an inverse: a recognition of what is fair and legitimate in the desire of the German people to excel as a nation and to inspire the future of a prosperous Europe. So long as those objectives are pursued by just and peaceful means, we have every reason to wish them well.