Part III

Reveries and Reverberations

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How Did Germany Go Right?

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To set a single agenda for German history would be a foolhardy task, but let us begin with a major generalization about the long-term development of the field. Two mega-issues have dominated the historiography and debates for a century or more, standing on the path of historical research like some huge boulders that can not be moved or even circumvented. The first concerns how the German communities of Central Europe had constructed a nation-state—*Tantae molis erat Germanam condere gentem*, to adapt Vergil. There was a Prussian-centered statist answer by scholars including Leopold von Ranke, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Friedrich Meinecke, and continuing through Christopher Clark's *Iron Kingdom*. A more decentered approach has, by contrast, stressed local experiences; liberal and participatory currents of a political or religious (often Roman Catholic in sympathy, e.g., the work of Franz Schnabel) or cultural nature; and, finally, the heritage of a federalist constitutionalism, whether instantiated in the Holy Roman Empire or in the later celebratory afterglow of *Heimat*.[1] The second mega-issue that dominated the historiography for the first generation—perhaps half-century—after World War II and the collapse of Nazism was one that I was asked about at my undergraduate oral examinations in the spring of 1960: Where did Germany go wrong? The catastrophic career of National Socialist Germany, both internally and for Europe in general, compelled my generation and later ones never to lose sight of that issue. Even those who rejected claims about long-term disabling flaws in the emergence of liberal democracy—the political original sin, so to speak—had to address that fundamental issue.

But we have left the postwar behind, and, although academic historiography and, certainly, popular writing will still find much to explain and narrate, historians of my age (born 1939) and many much younger ones find that this second question has been gnawed at sufficiently, to such a degree that it no longer compels our research. Holocaust history might be deemed an exception, but it is being constructed as a field that extends beyond its original German framing (see the recent forum in this journal).[2] It is over thirty years since David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley assailed the *Sonderweg* and helped to challenge the dominant narrative of German history—away from Berlin, toward regional politics and the forces of civil society—and almost two decades since Margaret Anderson emphasized the democratic electoral activity of the *Kaiserreich*.[3] The current American political situation

[1]Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[2]Andrew I. Port, ed., "Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate: A Forum with Gerrit Dworok, Richard J. Evans, Mary Fulbrook, Wendy Lower, A. Dirk Moses, Jeffrey K. Olick, and Timothy D. Snyder," *CEH* 50, no. 3 (2017): 375–403.

[3]David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

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since the election of Donald Trump will doubtless provoke some further examination for the purpose of comparison, but Germany is almost three-quarters of a century beyond the Third Reich—and it is almost a century since the beginning of the Weimar experiment. The result has been a rich proliferation of themes and issues. The national synthesis, nurtured by publishers, has never disappeared—witness Gordon Craig's and James Sheehan's contributions to the Oxford series on the history of modern Europe.[4] Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, inspired by an overriding consciousness of societal inequality, and Heinrich August Winkler's epic of convergence with "the West," have also kept the national framework vital; but national narratives can no longer claim to be hegemonic.[5]

Historians working today have thus felt ready to drop this heavy historiographical burden, if only from exhaustion or generational revolt—not because we have provided one definitive answer, but instead because we have come to understand that we must content ourselves with many. What, then, should those now active in the long post-postwar pursue for their vocation? Civil society, gender, the peculiar interlude of semi-sovereign East German history, Germany as a stalwart economic workhorse—or as a producer of edgy literature, philosophy, and film? Germans abroad, or in their colonies—a field now revitalized through anthropology and the history of the Global South? The Germans lost their colonies in 1918, but historians of the extraordinary Eurocentric epoch of presumed racial supremacy (including George Steinmetz, Andrew Zimmermann, and Suzanne Marchand, each taking a different approach) are truly situating Germany within a global context.[6] Central European History—as field and journal—has accommodated all these directions.

My own particular agenda at this point might be a reversal of the question I was asked almost sixty years ago: not where Germany went wrong, but how it went right. Many answers have certainly been proffered: the tutelage of the Anglo-American occupiers, *Lernprozesse* born out of the bankruptcy of National Socialism, the compelling normative power of Western liberalism, continued economic success, and the absence of alternative paths in the Cold War division of Europe. The question is overdetermined: too many plausible answers, each of which might alone suffice, contend as explanations. The same was true, of course, of the question of how Germany went wrong.

For perhaps personal reasons, I am interested less in institutional reconstruction than in the history of subjectivities. Mary Fulbrook addressed this issue in her 2016 lecture to the German Historical Institute in London, but her starting point has been the German Democratic Republic: how did it allow its citizens a degree of interior autonomy, something she has long stressed in her work.[7] Even though I devoted a book-length project aimed at

Press, 2000). See also Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), as well as Jürgen Kocka's contribution to this commemorative issue.

[4]Gordon A. Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[5]Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 5 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987–2008); Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West*, 2 vols., trans. Alexander J. Sager (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006–2007).

[6]George G. Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religions, Race, and Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[7]See Mary Fulbrook, *Subjectivity and History: Approaches to Twentieth-Century German Society* (London: German Historical Institute, 2017); idem, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*

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explaining why and how the communist commitment evaporated in the GDR, the Nazi starting point, given my age and origins, long remained my impulse for historical investigation. I think we should devote equal time to the question of how West Germany became a decent society in the years after 1945. Konrad Jarausch has sought to answer this question in *Recivilizing Germans*, but with an eye to institutions, whereas I am concerned increasingly with the history of mentalities.[8] I have tried earlier to write on *Sehnsucht*, or longing—something akin to nostalgia, but not exactly the same.[9] It is such emblematic German emotional states (loneliness might be another) that threaten to intrude on my "day job," namely, historical political economy. The reason may be very personal—my own experience as an adolescent exchange student in 1955, unprepared in the language, aware of a personal German-Jewish background. How did a country, apparently so committed to a monstrous dictatorship, become democratic, or at least *as* democratic, as its neighbors in the West? How did private lives survive authoritarian pressures—a theme that unites the study of the Nazi and GDR dictatorships? How did Germans overcome the mentality created by fear and denunciation? The most satisfying responses are fragmented and individual—those provided, for instance, twenty years ago by the massive interview project conducted by Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling.[10] Still, we can never conclusively answer this sort of question: how do we trust the intervening document or artifact between our anticipatory questions and the respondent's hesitant effort at an answer? How do we trust ourselves when we interpret the film or the photo or the novel? We peddle appearances and analogies and depend on their plausibility. Germany changed twice: it went "bad," and then it went "right," and *why* it did so remain challenging and probably irresolvable questions.

Today we can set few questions that involve Germany alone. Call it transnational history or something else—Germany is part of a larger society. But there are many larger societies. Define one as "Western"—but that is a very problematic concept.[11] Call it capitalism; think of it as the community of mass culture—or, most recently, of the global participants in digital networks… Our questions about Germany must also be questions about at least one other national society—perhaps our own, or, even better, about many at the same time. That does not mean that Germany dissolves as a historical subject. But it will ultimately require rethinking what a national historical framework involves, and whether a particular nation goes wrong or goes right—or goes somewhere else altogether.

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(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). Also see Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private life in the German Democratic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[8]Konrad Hugo Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995*, trans. Brandon Hunzinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[9]Charles S. Maier, "The End of Longing? (Notes toward a History of Postwar German National Longing)," in *The Postwar Transformation of Germany: Democracy, Prosperity, and Nationhood*, ed. John S. Brady, Beverly Crawford, and Sara Elise Wiliarty (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 271–85.

[10]Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR: 30 biografische Eröffnungen* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991); also see Lutz Niethammer, ed., *"Die Jahre weiss man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll"—Faschismuserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet* (Berlin: Dietz, 1983).

[11]See Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, eds., *Germany and "The West": The History of a Modern Concept* (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

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