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IMAGINING GERMANY FROM ABROAD: THE VIEW FROM BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES

A Joint Preface

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All nation-states are creations of physical topography, historical circumstance, political claims, and cultural imagination. A country's identity may be the result of its material place, legal self-understanding, and (invented) national traditions, but it is also defined by certain founding myths and historical associations born of dreams and distance. The histories of the United States, Liberia, and Israel are obvious examples, in that their territories have become mythic "landscapes of memory" in their own right for many around the world, even among those who have never been there.

Germany is also a noteworthy case in this respect, having served as a protean figure of envy, friendship, and horror in Anglo-American culture for the last 150 years. To be sure, the Germans have served as a source of foreign curiosity ever since Tacitus, yet it was the nineteenth-century rise of Prussia, the creation of the Second Reich in 1871, and the new nation's growing industrial muscle that lent the Anglo-American gaze across the continent a decidedly new and nervous edge. And given the way that Germany a few decades later altered, threatened, and summarily destroyed the lives of tens of millions of people across the globe in two world wars and the Holocaust, it is small wonder that Germany became a subject of relentless concern and commentary. Ever since the late nineteenth century, the changing perception of Germany in the Anglo-American world has been held up as a dark mirror of civilization itself, in that the study of Germany apparently told us as much about ourselves as it did about "the Germans." After 1945, Britons and Americans reworked German history both as a Cold War cautionary tale about the frailties of Western political culture and as a lens through which to examine the virtues and vices of their own cultures. Indeed, the task of understanding Germany and the Germans emerged as one of most vigorous academic cottage industries of the last century. Whatever its merits, this scholarly preoccupation was largely driven by the assumption that German history was far too important to be left to the Germans.

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In the last few decades, the perceived value and meaning of German history have changed a great deal, but the idea that its history somehow reveals something profound about the century as a whole remains widely shared. The founding of the two premier Anglophone journals in the field of German historical studies, *Central European History* (U.S.) in 1967 and *German History* (U.K.) in 1984, was born of the spirit to showcase new research on Germany as a kind of "laboratory of modernity," and in so doing to develop international understanding through the production of historical knowledge.

This special issue is dedicated to addressing this theme more directly, with a view toward exploring cases of how the British and Americans have imagined Germany over the last hundred years or so. The idea of a joint special issue between *German History* and *Central European History* was first suggested by Alon Confino, and we are pleased to have brought the idea to fruition. The linked theme of "Imagining Germany from Abroad" is a good way of drawing attention to our common enterprise of publishing leading scholarly work on German history for a largely Anglophone readership. A transatlantic joint venture of this kind is thus unique, and reflects a cooperative international spirit of learning from and about German history. The special *German History* issue, "Imagining Germany: Views from Britain," edited by Patrick Major, amply shows how Modern Germany has been a long-standing reference point for British culture since the Victorian Era, ranging from Christmas culture to filmic images of the Third Reich, from popular fear of the Kaiser to the leftist romance with GDR socialism. By contrast, *Central European History*'s special issue on "Imagining Germany: Views from America" focuses on twentieth-century German-American relations, covering topics from the visual arts to foundational archival projects in the U.S., from (Black) American encounters with Germans in the immediate aftermath of World War II to the interactions of German and American historians in the 1960s. Underlying these complementary special issues is not only the Anglo-American world's "love-hate" relationship toward Germany since Bismarck; what they also show is that intercultural understanding is itself an historical artifact in need of attention and care.

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