

INTRODUCTION

A Poisoned Past



For young postwar Germans like myself, the past was not an inspiration but a heavy burden with which they struggled to make sense of the mass murder committed in their country's name. Instead of growing up in a peaceful world and being proud of our country, we as children of the war were confronted with the physical and moral debris of the Third Reich that forced us to rebuild our personal future as well as our political outlook. Ashamed of the disastrous legacy left by our elders, we distanced ourselves from our national heritage and tried to strike out on our own in the search for models that often took us abroad. While some members of our cohort clung to religious or bourgeois traditions, many others embraced a critical view of German history that challenged orthodoxy by importing interpretations from overseas émigrés or by learning from Nazi victims at home. Inspired by the broader exploration of seven dozen "German Migrant Historians in North America," the following text presents an individual narrative so as to reflect on the effort at wrestling with a catastrophic past in general.¹

In contrast to other Europeans, German youths had few sources of pride in their own country because virtually all their traditions had been corrupted by National Socialism. Since 17 June was a Cold War creation, there was no real holiday to celebrate the democratic heritage of 1848 and 1918. Hoffmann von Fallersleben's national anthem was restricted to the third verse of "unity, right and freedom" so as to avoid "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*" The style of the Federal Republic was sober and provisional, a state in waiting for a future rebirth that seemed to recede ever more. Even innocuous folk songs fell out of favor because they had been bellowed by marching SA columns. At the same time, the revived Bundeswehr had difficulty deciding whether to base its sense of tradition

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The Burden of German History: A Transatlantic Life

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Figure 0.2. Lurcy Professor of European Civilization.
Photo courtesy of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

on the Wehrmacht or the Resistance.² Adolescent Germans were therefore embarrassed by their own country and rather sought inspiration from anti-fascist intellectuals or athletic heroes like the 1954 winners of the soccer World Cup.

Popular representations of German history abroad also tended to employ a whole repertoire of negative stereotypes repeated by the media. While German immigrants to the United States largely blended in, the Kaiser's injunction during the Boxer Rebellion to "be terrible like the Huns" left a lasting impression, especially when reinforced by the image of heel-clicking and monocled Prussian Junkers. While the democratic émigrés of the Weimar Republic evoked sympathy, the potbellied, beer-drinking brownshirts of the SA created much revulsion due to their brutality. Even more feared were the Wehrmacht officers, who featured in countless World War II propaganda movies, due to their arrogance and ruthlessness. Most reviled were the Blackshirts of the SS, mainstays of the Nazi dictatorship and henchmen of genocide in the concentration camps.³ Prompted by actual NS excesses, these repulsive new images overshadowed the older appreciation of "the country of poets and thinkers."

During the postwar decades the negative legacy of the German past even colored some personal encounters in foreign settings. When asked about their origin abroad, young Germans tended to evade the issue by claiming just to be Europeans. During one blind date in Madison, Wisconsin, a young Jewish woman accused me of being a Nazi even though I was too young to have been personally involved. Since her family had not directly suffered from persecution, she repeated a widespread cultural resentment. Another example of Germanophobia was the refusal of some Jewish customers to buy German products like VW or Mercedes cars. German youths therefore learned to live with a collective stigma that many of them resented. A more constructive response was to confront the legacy of German crimes in order to understand the reasons for such feelings and to make attempts at international reconciliation, like with the Aktion Sühnezeichen or the joint youth efforts to tend to military graves.⁴

Presenting my own effort of coming to terms with this poisoned past, this autobiography deals with my involvement in half a century of scholarly debate about German history on both sides of the Atlantic. Due to the prewar emigration of liberal and Jewish historians as well as the postwar reorientation of West German historians, the connection between American and German scholars has been extraordinarily close.⁵ The initial effort of political and diplomatic historians focused on the Nazi dictatorship and the responsibility for World War II. The impact of the social sciences then triggered the development of quantitative methods that looked for generalizations. The German version of the “history of society” sought to provide historical foundations for the Federal Republic, while a parallel East German effort attempted to legitimize the GDR with a Marxist history. More recently, the transatlantic exchanges have debated the “cultural turn,” women’s and gender history, and the Holocaust. Due to a lengthy scholarly career and a residence on both sides of the Atlantic, my own work has been involved in virtually all of these approaches, providing a guide to their succession.

In order to be generally relevant, such a self-historicization must seek to address broader themes beyond individual interest. No doubt, my personal experience, including its intimate dimension, remains at the core of the narrative. But this academic autobiography intends to probe the connection between my individual life and the development of an entire academic field. Its form is inspired by the exemplary accounts of Jewish émigrés like George L. Mosse as well as the postcommunist narratives of GDR historians like Fritz Klein, even if its content might be somewhat less dramatic.⁶ The subsequent text seeks to combine the presentation of personal experiences with a discussion of scholarly interpretations in a

challenging mixture of narrative and reflection. By addressing the role of one German-born US historian as a transatlantic mediator, this autobiography hopes to shed light on the effort of the entire field to draw lessons from a catastrophic past.

The double focus on my personal life and intellectual engagement makes it necessary to address a mixture of chronological issues and thematic topics. The narrative begins by recalling my wartime childhood in Germany that awakened my interest in history. The text then discusses my Americanization at the universities of Wyoming and Wisconsin, which developed into my training as a historian in the United States. The next part examines the transformation of my research interests from political biography to the new social and later on cultural history in order to wrestle with the thesis of a “special path” of German development. The following chapter engages the debate about the failure of the GDR and my role as director at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam. Finally, the analysis returns to the University of North Carolina to explore the shift toward Holocaust and gender approaches as well as the training of dozens of PhDs. By expanding an earlier summary of more than five decades of transatlantic scholarship,⁷ this account seeks to illuminate some of the main developments of German and European history and historiography.

Historical experiences hold the key to understanding Berlin’s policies in several controversial areas. For instance, the German fear of inflation and insistence on austerity are the product of the hyperinflation in the early 1920s. Berlin’s pacifist rejection of the use of military force is the result of two lost wars with enormous loss of life that touched almost every family with some member killed. The FRG’s foreign policy axiom of multilateral negotiation stems from misguided unilateral efforts to gain control of the European continent. Berlin’s use of trade and exchange is part of a European learning experience that integration is more effective than bludgeoning. The special sensitivity toward Moscow comes from feelings of guilt for the twenty-seven million Soviets killed in World War II. Similarly, the unquestioning support of Israel is the consequence of a deep sense of shame for the Holocaust. The peculiarity of such reactions can only be understood as collective experiences that make Berlin different from its neighbors.⁸

Confronting the German past also remains important because it contains universal lessons that should never be forgotten. On the one hand, the first half of the twentieth century presents a cautionary tale, full of catastrophes and depression, followed by dictatorship, world war, and mass murder. It is a stark reminder of what can go wrong when cultural conflict and economic crisis empower a populist frenzy to capture a government that implements repressive policies that would have been considered out-

rageous in a civilized society. Through insistent memorialization, the Holocaust has become the symbol of ultimate evil that calls for a vigorous commitment to human rights in order to prevent its recurrence. But on the other hand, this shocking history also holds a more encouraging message of a potential recovery of civility. A consistent internal effort, aided by outside pressure, can succeed in self-critically transforming a political culture and in restoring a vibrant democracy. In spite of ugly right-wing remnants, the Federal Republic of Germany has become a pillar of domestic stability and European peace. To explain this perplexing story to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic has become the task of my life.

Notes

1. Karen Hagemann and Konrad H. Jarausch, eds., *German Migrant Historians in North America after 1945* (forthcoming New York, 2024).
2. Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichte als Waffe: Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Göttingen, 2001).
3. Hans Walter Frischkopf, ed., *Images of Germany* (New York, 2000).
4. <https://www.asf-ev.de>; <https://www.volksbund.de/jugendbegegnungen/>.
5. Philipp Stelzel, *History after Hitler: A Transatlantic Enterprise* (Philadelphia, 2019).
6. George L. Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir* (Madison, 2000); Fritz Klein, *Drinnen und draussen: Ein Historiker in der DDR: Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt, 2000). Cf. Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005), and Martin Klingst, *Guido Goldman: Transatlantic Bridge Builder* (New York, 2021).
7. Konrad H. Jarausch, "Contemporary History as Transatlantic Project: The German Problem, 1960–2010," in *Historical Social Research*, supplement 24 (Cologne, 2012).
8. Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995* (New York, 2006).