After Germany's defeat in 1945, West German chemical firms made the transition from traditional coal-based chemistry to modern petrochemical technology, thus ensuring their long-term competitiveness. This book investigates the causes, course, and consequences of that major change in West German chemical technology. In seeking to explain the actual process of that transition and its broader cultural implications, the author examines the factors that led key chemical firms to pursue petrochemical production, the basis on which the chemical industrialists chose among the competing technologies, the process of technology transfer (primarily from the United States and Great Britain to Germany, but also the reverse), and the trends in German research, production, investment, and marketing after the war.

Using approaches drawn from the history of technology, business history, and political and economic history, and taking advantage of material from a broad range of public and private archives, this study argues that it is impossible to explain technological developments in the chemical industry from the end of the war until 1961 without exploring a number of other areas, including corresponding changes in the West German and worldwide political economies during the same period, as well as German traditions regarding technological change. Neither the move to petroleum-based feedstocks nor the pace of the transition was inevitable; rather, both depended on choices made by politicians and industrialists within the context of the political economy of the 1950s, as well as the context of prior German experience.

This study addresses a wide variety of issues: the problems of continuity and change in German history; the origins and impact of the decision to divide Germany; the origins, unfolding, and effects of the Wirtschaftswunder, or economic miracle; European integration; the changing role of the West German Federal Republic in the international political order; and the bases of the international competitiveness of West German industry.
Opting for Oil
Opting for Oil

The political economy of technological change in the West German chemical industry, 1945–1961

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To Anne Marie, Jonathan, and Nikolas
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Preface

I began work on this project shortly after sending off the final manuscript of *Divide and Prosper: The Heirs of I. G. Farben under Allied Authority, 1945–1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) in November 1987. Because it was related to the first project, it seemed at the start a relatively straightforward task. As it turned out, things were not that simple, for concentrating on the political economy of technological change involved questions completely different from those animating my first study. It also involved using new and different documentary materials, some of which became available only as I was writing (or rewriting) this book. As I wrestled with these problems, I benefited from a number of conversations with Alan Bayerchen, whose ideas and work have influenced my own considerably. Working in Rensselaer’s Department of Science and Technology Studies has also affected the final results of my research – my colleagues will no doubt recognize their influences.

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