Introduction

I address this book to all readers curious to know the drama of modern German history. It assumes no prior acquaintance with the subject, but rather conveys what its author, in many years of teaching and writing, has learned to be the essential knowledge without which further exploration and inquiry are hardly possible. This includes a minimal familiarity with the principal broad-gauged interpretations and "master narratives" that have competed among historians and other scholars, and continue to do so today. All chronologically framed accounts are inescapably interpretive and theoretical. It is futile to suppose that German history – or any other history – can be compressed into a seemingly objective, self-explanatory narrative.

History, like all the human and natural sciences, happens in the global republic of letters. It is a form of human understanding, not a mirror-like reflection of events, which, after all, do not interpret themselves, nor are they laden with singular meanings obvious to all retrospective viewers. It accumulates documented, ascertainable knowledge, not only in response to controversies and riddles of life inherited from the past, but equally to questions rooted in contemporary dilemmas and strivings. The discipline of history is a space where inquiring minds, driven by multifarious and competing passions and interests, analyze facts of human experience – empirical knowledge – to gain structured understanding and guidelines for present judgment and action, and where they rigorously query the solidity of resulting claims to truth and meaning.

Yet such considerations must not deter the teacher and writer from fashioning a lucid and defensible, centuries-spanning analysis of even so complex a subject as German history – a perhaps deceivingly straightforward concept whose subtleties these pages will plumb. It is one of the historian's jobs to render multidimensional, long-range history coherent, and thus thinkable and debatable. I have often urged students to rise to the challenge of "creative simplification" so as to invest particularized phenomena with meaningful patterns. Did not Albert Einstein achieve this in the proposition $e = mc^2$?

The picture these pages present cannot be translated into a formula. But the reader will find that the separate chapters weave multicolored threads forming a larger tapestry. It is a pattern that emerges from the fundamental challenge that arises in thinking something anew: What is the first step toward comprehension, and what is the next? The answers amount to a burgeoning progression of arguments. The fundamental themes are, as they must be in an introductory work, the organization of power in state and economy; compelling visions of meaningful and desirable social and national life; and the interplay – ideologically and culturally coded – between these two realms of human life, material and intellectual.

National history, like the history of any other human collectivity, and even of single individuals, runs the risk of "naturalizing" its subject – that is, of treating it as an integrated phenomenon, with a "character" spanning the years and centuries, "evolving" or "unfolding" in time so as to "realize" itself or rise to the height of its "development." This book's subtitle, "Four Lives of the Nation," points not to the historical continuity of an organic whole – "the German nation" – but rather to four quite different epochs in the experience of the German-speaking peoples of central Europe. Between them, of course, were continuities, but also ruptures so great as to occasion the disappearance of social, political, and cultural identities and the death of worldviews and spirits of the age (terms derived from their now semi-English German originals, *Weltanschauung* and *Zeitgeist*).

The national lives I refer to, and discuss in the book's four subsections are (1) the era of the pre-nationalist German lands – the "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation," as it came to be called – spanning the centuries before the world-changing French Revolution of 1789; (2) the years 1789–1914 – the "long nineteenth century" – during which new collective self-understandings emerged, distilled out of varying mixtures of modern nationalism, liberalism, and socialism; (3) the violent, traumatic, and tragic experience in the years between 1914 and 1945 of two world wars, crisis-rocked democracy, dictatorship and mass murder; and (4) the emergence from war, moral catastrophe, and national semi-extinction of new identities – in part imposed from outside, defensive, self-denying, but also self-generated, recuperative, and innovative – from the end of World War II to the present. The absorption in 1990 of defunct communist East Germany into the West German Federal Republic – an unprecedented fusion, yet also a reunification – raises the question whether dawn may now be breaking on a fifth German nation. It seems to be so – we will return to this question – but such a complex community's contours still lie in semi-shadow.

The emergence in their day of these four German-speaking life-worlds spelled the death or senescence of their precursors, accompanied by more or less violence, suffering, injustice, and crisis of meaning. Yet continuities abound, without whose emphasis long-range historical explanations pale.

After Chapter 1's sketch of influential twentieth-century interpretations of modern German history, the book unveils the geographical and regional

settings in which German-speaking people – many-minded, socially variegated, politically and religiously centrifugal – have enacted their history. Another chapter addresses the legacy of the Middle Ages – the medieval millennium – and the struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries over the reformation of Christianity and the government of Christendom. On these great themes I offer the barest of what anyone pondering modern German history must understand.

With the emergence in the German lands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of military-bureaucratic power-states, and the simultaneous impact of the European Enlightenment and a commercialized market economy moving toward industrialization, the book's plot thickens. It will be seen that the legacy of the early modern – that is, the pre-1789 or pre-French Revolution – era to the modern history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is of considerable and, in some interpreters' minds, fateful significance. It is important to gain confidence in one's ability to connect fundamental developments in the last three or four centuries, without succumbing to fallacious notions of inescapable predetermination.

This book proceeds more thematically than chronologically, although historical phenomena must be grasped in their passage through time. Human life displays an interaction between the search for power, material advantage, and self-interest on the one hand and cultural and ethical meaning and social community on the other. There is a *power-culture axis* around which human motives constitute themselves both by the pursuit of power (individual, communal, national) and of cultural values, so that power becomes meaningful and worthy of possession – that is, morally legitimate – in the eyes of its holders and (if wielded successfully) its subjects. Power shorn of legitimacy is, especially if it falters, ripe for repudiation and revolution.

In the history of the German lands, as in many other histories, the organization of government has been an explosive problem. Likewise, the state's cultural justification and mission, as well as the emotional and ethical benefits it promised its subjects, have been in Germany, as elsewhere, much contested. It is well known that in Hitler's National Socialist dictatorship of 1933–1945, history's most aggressive and bloody-handed nationalism held sway. Less often is it remembered that pre-1933 German society brought forth Europe's most formidable working-class socialist movement, much inspired by Marxism. Christian conservative monarchism, deep-rooted federalist-minded localism, populist political Catholicism, and ethnic and religious subcultures have all influentially walked German central Europe's stage.

The Holocaust – or Shoah (Hebrew for "catastrophe") – brought to a sudden and previously unimaginable end one of the world's most important Jewish communities. In the nineteenth century, most of the millions-strong central European Jews ardently embraced German culture and identity, making contributions of the highest importance both to Jewish and non-Jewish German life. In science and technology, and in art, literature, and music, the German

lands have brought forth a fertile harvest of controversial and disruptive, but also enriching and horizon-widening modernity and modernism.

Alongside such themes, some of them neglected in broad-gauged histories, these pages will trace the earlier parliamentary and welfare-state developments on which the present-day German Federal Republic's political democracy and self-styled "socially responsible market economy" have built. Nor have I excluded Austria, and especially not the mighty Austrian Habsburg monarchy, from its crucial role in central European history. The attainment of a unified nation-state – born, as we will see, in 1866–1871 from Prussian-German armed might – could not sever the ties joining the two great German-speaking political and cultural spheres centered on Prussian Berlin and Austrian Vienna. Under Hitler they came together in a much desired reunion, although it proved to be a marriage of destruction.

The post-1945 years have witnessed great changes, as the homogeneity that nationalist intolerance and defeat in war imposed (despite deep regional differences among German-speakers themselves) gave way to large-scale immigration, especially from Christian and Muslim regions of the Mediterranean basin. Germany and Austria are today once again ethnically diverse societies, and their efforts to adjust to this condition against the background of earlier exclusionary nationalism are a crucial test.

A broadly conceived history of the German lands, like other accounts of whole societies, must appear as an interplay of cultural-intellectual, economic-technological, political, and social factors. The historian enjoys the freedom, more than the other human sciences' practitioners, of precisely *not* privileging any one of these life dimensions over the others, but rather of investigating each and all as the problem at hand dictates. Confidence must be gained to work knowledgeably at these four main desks of the historiographical command post, and to know when to shift from one to another. Causal primacy among the various spheres of human action and creativity will vary with the question raised. Panoramic historical interpretations are intellectual constructions – not rigid and unchanging verities, but rather ever-evolving. So long as their design does not recklessly fly in the face of empirical fact, they are true in – and, one could add, true to – their own day.

These pages trace the shifting interrelations of society, politics, and culture, but they also accept the "simultaneity of the dissimilar" in human affairs. Daily life in the countryside, small towns, and big cities moved to different rhythms. High intellectual and artistic culture, too, often followed its own paths. Family and gender relations display a certain self-generated dynamic, as was also true of the political history of the Austrian-ruled lands in comparison with other German states.

The tragic era of National Socialism shows that the optimistic concept of an ever-rising trajectory of historical progress must be countered by recognition that terrible breakdowns occur. In the time and place at which this book was written, and will be read, it is impossible not to contrast modern German history's configuration with the scenario for humanity written by liberal-minded

thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: advancing political enfranchisement and democratization, social equality, scientific mastery of nature, and the subjection of power to rationally grounded law and universal ethics. These ideals have long been the guiding stars for the western world's political cultures as they drift – or hurtle – forward into an unknown and undetermined future. These pages will reveal how this scenario took original shapes of its own in German central Europe, and how these fared over time.

A book's Introduction is not the place to deliver final judgments on such ventures' outcomes. Yet readers will appreciate that our own culture's concerns lend urgency to the question of the viability of the western democratic vision and its accompanying assumptions about human progress. At the same time, in science and philosophy, as in the writing of history, no beliefs – or hopes – are sacrosanct. We must test the strength of the liberal-democratic blueprint of rational progress to interpret the real world of human history, even at the cost of exposing it, in part or whole, as a powerful illusion. German history is one of its crucial testing grounds. Was Hitler's "Third Reich" a regressive and barbarous departure from the path of all-conquering Enlightenment, or was it an ominous embodiment of anti-liberal modernity? This is not the only question to pose, but it has absorbed powerful minds.

This book's many visual images translate into particular sites and individual personalities the historical structures, developments, and mentalities of which the successive chapters speak. They form a microconstellation illuminating the text's macrostructure. They aim, too, to evoke recognition of the humanity of the actors in this book's dramas, and in most cases sympathy for them as well, even if many of the German lands' inhabitants in the past several centuries were different from their Anglo-American counterparts and ourselves: more conservative-minded or more radical, or otherwise culturally distant.

National Socialism's shadow engulfed the lives of myriads of German-speaking people, morally crippling or destroying many of them through complicity in the deaths of millions of Jewish and non-German victims of Hitlerism's murderous machinery. Yet in the last three or four centuries a far greater number of them lived under the same moral firmament as overarched neighboring cultures in the past and ourselves today: clouded by present uncertainties and illusions and the past's irreparable missteps, illuminated by life's rewards, communal solidarities, and possibilities of freedom.

Between the late eighteenth century and the outbreak in 1914 of World War I, the German lands practiced less violence than other European Great Powers and the United States. The Federal Republic today, and Austria too, are democracies whose liberality, prosperity, and commitment to citizenly equality and universal human rights are, if imperfect, yet also second to none among the world's societies. A history of German central Europe must account for this outcome as well as the immense and tragic violence that the National Socialist regime – a dictatorship, although with much popular backing – inflicted on other peoples, on German-speakers themselves, and on the idea of Germany.

I

Historiographie

Interpreting German History

Historical knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is a many-dimensioned, accumulating but sometimes self-revolutionizing achievement of hypothesis-driven, empirical (evidence-based) research. It moves simultaneously in different directions, according to whether the problem under investigation is one of political, social, economic, or cultural history. Yet there has been, from the earliest human thinking about history, a powerful tendency to synthesize knowledge of the past into an all-encompassing single narrative, whether at the local level of the tribe or city-state, or at the higher levels of the kingdom or territorial state, religiously defined civilization, or the entire world. In present-day language, such integrated histories bear the name of "master narratives." However objectively they may be presented, as if there were no reasonable alternatives, it is important to realize that they are, at their best, intellectual constructions subject to revision in the light of new evidence and interpretation. At their worst they are ideologically distorted accounts serving the ends of seekers or holders of power.

Historical knowledge is not scholarship's exclusive preserve. Master narratives are memorized roadmaps by which individuals and whole societies attempt to guide themselves forward. They are learned in school, in political ritual, in the popular media, and in private life, passed – as is sometimes said, "at the supper table" – from one generation to the next. They are more often uncritically adopted, as if they were common sense, than consciously embraced after a process of critical appraisal, or of searching for alternatives to the popularly prevalent view. Yet it is also typical of modern societies that some aspects of widely shared historical narratives are controversial and even hotly contested, especially those on which conflicting political ideologies hinge.

In post-1945 thinking about modern German history, the disastrous era of National Socialist dictatorship, imperialism, and genocide, although it lasted but twelve years (1933–1945), has been the focal point of the broad interpretations contending for influence over people's minds and shaping German self-understanding. Because the war that Hitler launched was a traumatic

experience for all Europe, as well as for the United States and the world at large, any understanding of the twentieth century requires an explanation of National Socialism. Not surprisingly, there are many historians of Germany in foreign lands, especially in Britain and north America. Pre-1945 German history, although vital to German-speakers themselves, is important in a crucial – if in part ominous – way to the rest of the world.

Yet 1945 now lies several generations in the past. Post-World War II German history offers a dramatic story of recovery from crushing defeat amid conflicting tendencies to self-blindingly deny and constructively confront Hitlerism's agonizing legacy. In the end, repudiation of illiberalism prevailed, even if – as in all societies – authoritarian impulses survive. The vigor of West Germany's parliamentary democracy and "socially responsible market economy," which after 1990 successfully incoporated the lands of the former Soviet-aligned East Germany, has brought forth a contemporary state and society that other countries, especially in post-communist eastern Europe, are interested in emulating. Although it possesses one of the world's strongest economies, the Federal Republic of Germany is now struggling – like other western countries – to come to terms with economic globalization's destabilizing dynamics. Yet it acts more effectively than most nations in response to the challenges posed by social disparities and environmental degradation at home, and by North-South world inequality abroad.

How to connect the histories of the pre-1933 and post-1945 German lands with the National Socialist years is a challenging question, energetically debated among professional historians. Yet there is widespread agreement, especially in public education and popular culture (including the consciousness-molding film and television industries), about what seem to be the "central facts" of modern German history, even if controversy surrounds their interpretation. Here, summed up in ten widely shared propositions, is the "standard model" that competing broad-gauged narratives have, with varying emphases, conveyed and sought to explain. (Readers unfamiliar with the events and personalities mentioned here will learn of them in later pages.)

- Deploying the military power of the monarchical-aristocratic, Berlin-centered Kingdom of Prussia, "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck forged out of the scattered principalities of the premodern German lands (once quaintly called "the Germanies") a powerful united national state: the German Empire of 1871–1918.
- In 1914, Kaiser (emperor) William II's government – acting in concert with Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph's regime – unleashed (or co-ignited) World War I, aggressively seeking German preeminence among the Great Powers, overseas expansion, and large territorial gains in eastern Europe.
- Owing finally to American intervention in the war, the German-Austrian Central Powers in 1918 suffered defeat. The Kaiser's regime fell amid left-wing revolution on the home front. Moderate elements eventually gained

the upper hand, establishing a shaky liberal democracy: the Weimar Republic. But the 1919 Treaty of Versailles's punitive terms, imposed by the Great War's victor powers, weakened the new democracy's popular acceptance. In the 1920s, it suffered wrenching economic crises and international humiliation.

- In the worldwide Great Depression that gripped Germany in 1929–1933, radical mass movements on both the left (the German Communists) and the right (Hitler's National Socialists) grew mightily, paralyzing Weimar's parliamentary system. A similar fate befell the post-1918 Austrian republic. In 1933 Hitler, having assembled the strongest electoral base, assumed the chancellorship with the support of conservatives who had never reconciled themselves to their 1918 defeats.
- The National Socialists established a ruthless, police-state dictatorship. Economic recovery and rearmament followed. In 1939 Hitler's aggressive foreign policy sparked World War II, which his armies fought with seeming irresistibility. In 1941 he acted on a longstanding aim, launching an anti-communist crusade of destruction against Soviet ("Bolshevik") Russia, catalyzing an unprecedented program of mass murder against European Jews and a campaign of enslavement against other targeted peoples of eastern Europe.
- In 1943–1945, Germany suffered disastrous battlefield defeat at both Soviet and western hands. For the next forty-five years (1945–1990) the victorious Allies, after stripping the country of its eastern provinces, held it in division and subjection: the western Federal Republic of Germany opposing the eastern German Democratic Republic, subordinated respectively to the American-led NATO alliance and to the Soviet Union. Thus did the German nation suffer for having succumbed to fanatical, racist nationalism under Hitler's command.
- Under western – and especially American – tutelage, West Germany developed, after 1949, into a well-functioning liberal democracy. It bore responsibility, or was forced to bear responsibility, for National Socialism's crimes and for making reparations to its victims. When in 1989 the Soviet empire began to collapse, revolt stirred in communist East Germany. The peoples of the two German states seized the opportunity to incorporate the eastern lands into the western state, reunifying the country in 1990.
- Alhough reunification cost West German society some of its prosperity, there is wide consensus that it was desirable and has proved a success. Public opinion outside Germany largely accepts this judgment.
- Skeptical views surface occasionally among British, French, and north American critics, and among some Germans as well. They observe that, after 1990, reunification's burdens evoked embittered reactions, especially among former East Germans, but also in West Germany. Right-radical politics located the targets of resentment in the roughly 8 percent of the population who were born abroad, mostly in Turkey and other largely Muslim developing countries, and their German-born children. They suffered assault, on a

few occasions lethal, as an alleged menace to the ethnic unity and cultural-political coherence of the nation. While acts of xenophobic violence, never numerous, dwindled in the new century, they occur intermittently, both in west and east.

- Yet in the present day an enlightened and liberal-minded electorate, favoring German integration in a united Europe (the European Union [EU]), steers public affairs. Although there exists in reunited Germany an anti-EU minority, sometimes nationalist-minded and prejudice-laden, it is smaller and less significant than similar right-radical movements elsewhere in western and central Europe. Meanwhile Germany – one of the world's leading trading nations – has built Europe's largest economy, inextricably bound up with its EU neighbors, controversial though their mutual relations and responsibilities sometimes are. The Federal Republic now figures on the world's landscape as a progressive and democratic land that has, in its public culture, confronted and largely disarmed the National Socialist past.

Contending Interpretations

If these points combine into a widely embraced scenario or narrative, the challenge remains to offer a causal explanation for it, including the tragic violence of Hitler's dictatorship. Among political writers and journalists, professional historians, and social scientists, four broad interpretive approaches have been especially influential.

There is, first, the "negative identity" argument. Raised to caricatured heights in the western Allies' anti-German propaganda in the two world wars, and fitfully perpetuated in the popular media today, this approach postulates a "German national character" stamped, before 1945, by authoritarianism toward outsiders and deference at home toward antidemocratic or dictatorial authority; by militarism and expansionary drives, particularly in eastern, Slavic directions; and by ethnic intolerance and anti-Semitism, readiness for violence, and related social-psychological disabilities.

This approach struggles to explain why the characteristics it targets were more prevalent among German-speakers than other peoples. The usual explanation (apart from emotion-driven, irrational notions of "inborn" or "inherent traits") concentrates on the historical effects of "Prussian militarism" (or the "legacy of the premodern military-bureaucratic state") paired – especially so far as anti-Jewish prejudice and political anti-Semitism are concerned – with "persecutory Christianity." Yet such influences bore down on most large European countries, so that it is not easy to explain why their effects were uniquely disastrous in the German lands.

Second, and dissenting from some of the previously listed ten propositions, there is the moderate-conservative view. This found influential expression in the writings of eminent German historians, notably Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) and Gerhard Ritter (1888–1967). They held that the ruling establishment of Imperial Germany (1871–1918), despite its conservative monarchism and

(a)

FIGURE 1.1. STEREOTYPES OF GERMAN SOCIETY AND HISTORY
(a) Prussian reserve officers passing review, ca. 1900, quite likely on Imperial Germany's national holiday, which celebrated victory against France in the 1870–1871 war over German unification. Reserve officer status was a prized attribute among socially ascendant middle-class professionals of patriotic and nationalist temperament. Many critical eyes have detected in such pictures the "militarization of German society" and even the "feudalization of the bourgeoisie." But similar scenes might easily be documented from pre-1914 life in western Europe and the United States.

military ambitions, was politically responsible and mindful of the desirability of European peace. World War I was a catastrophe for which Germany and its Austrian partner were not more responsible than other Great Powers. Wartime defeat unleashed in German central Europe the radical forces of modern "mass society." Political democratization and waning popular religiosity weakened older social-cultural restraints and in the unstable conditions of the 1920s encouraged the rise of Communism and National Socialism. The 1919 Versailles Treaty gave fateful expression to French and Anglo-American opposition to Germany's rightful and necessary strong role in the international system, which in Bismarck's day had been, as this view holds, a stabilizing one.