A Concise History of Germany

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This book provides a clear and informative guide to the twists and turns of German history from the early middle ages to the present day. The multi-faceted, problematic history of the German lands has provided a wide range of debates and differences of interpretation. Mary Fulbrook provides a crisp synthesis of a vast array of historical material, and explores the interrelationships between social, political and cultural factors in the light of scholarly controversies.

First published in 1990, A Concise History of Germany appeared in an updated edition in 1992, and in a second edition in 2004. It is the only single-volume history of Germany in English which offers a broad, general coverage. It has become standard reading for all students of German, European studies and history, and is a useful guide to general readers, members of the business community and travellers to Germany.
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 INTRODUCTION: THE GERMAN LANDS AND PEOPLE</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 MEDIAEVAL GERMANY</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The beginnings of German history</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany in the early and high middle ages</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany in the later middle ages</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 THE AGE OF CONFESSIONALISM, 1500–1648</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The German Reformation: the early years</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The German Peasants’ War</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The development of the German Reformation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany in the age of Counter-Reformation</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thirty Years War</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Peace of Westphalia and the effects of the War</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 THE AGE OF ABSOLUTISM, 1648–1815</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutism and the rise of Prussia</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion, culture and Enlightenment</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of the French Revolution</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 THE AGE OF INDUSTRIALISATION, 1815–1918</strong></td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration Germany, 1815–48</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The revolutions of 1848</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The unification of Germany</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany under Bismarck</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and politics in Wilhelmine Germany</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

Culture in Imperial Germany  144  
Foreign policy and the First World War  148  

6  **Democracy and Dictatorship, 1918–45**  155  
   The Weimar Republic: origins and early years  156  
   The period of apparent stabilisation  167  
   The collapse of Weimar democracy  172  
   The consolidation of Hitler's power  179  
   Foreign policy and war  187  
   Holocaust, resistance and defeat  197  

7  **The Two Germanies, 1945–90**  205  
   The creation of the two Germanies  205  
   From establishment to consolidation  212  
   Politics in the two Germanies, 1949–89  220  
   Economy and society in West Germany  230  
   Economy and society in the GDR, 1949–89  235  
   The revolution of 1989 and the unification of Germany  243  

8  **The Federal Republic of Germany since 1990**  250  

9  **Patterns and Problems of German History**  258  

*Suggestions for further reading*  262  
*Index*  272
ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

   page 3

2 A crucifix near Jachenau, in southern Bavaria. Photo: Harriett C. Wilson  
   5

3 The view toward Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. Photo by the author  
   7

4 Illustrations of Minnesinger from the fourteenth-century Mannes Manuscript. Source: *Die Minnesinger in Bildern der Mannischen Handschrift* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1929)  
   21

5 The government of Augsburg is handed over to the guilds, 1368. Sketch from *Das Behaim Ehrenbuch der bürgerlichen und zunftlichen Regierung der hl. Reichsstadt Augsburg* (1545), reproduced in Ullstein’s *Weltgeschichte* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1907–9)  
   23

6 The Marienburg. Source: *Die schöne Heimat*  
   25

7 A page from Eike von Repgow, *Sachsenspiegel*, including details of the granting of a castle as a fief. Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel  
   30

8 ‘Passional Christi und Anti-Christi’, with woodcuts by Lukas Cranach the Elder. The Pope is identified with Anti-Christ. Reproduced from Ullstein’s *Weltgeschichte*  
   41
List of illustrations


10 A very full depiction of means of exorcism and methods of dealing with a witch and her two helpers (Augsburg: Elias Wellhofer, 1654). Flugschriftensammlung, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel


12 War depicted as a beast ravaging Germany (n.p.: 1630/1648). Flugschriftensammlung, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel


14 A depiction of ‘travellers’, people with no fixed livelihood in the disrupted society of mid-seventeenth-century Europe. Source: Ullstein’s Weltgeschichte

15 The Diet of the Holy Roman Empire at Regensburg, 1653. Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel

16 The Würzburg Residence, designed by Balthasar Neumann, and mainly built in the period 1720–44. Source: Johannes Arndt, Deutsche Kunst der Barockzeit (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1941)

17 Recruitment of soldiers in the early eighteenth century. From H. J. von Fleming, Der Vollkommene Teutsche Soldat (Leipzig, 1726), reproduced in Ullstein’s Weltgeschichte

18 Nuremberg in 1774. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, Kupferstichkabinett

19 The altar in the monastery of Benediktbeuern, southern Bavaria. Photo: Harriett C. Wilson
List of illustrations

20 The battle of Jena, 1806. Source: Ullstein’s Weltgeschichte

21 Prince Metternich in his study. Source: Karl Gutskow, Unter dem schwarzen Bären (E. Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1971)

22 The ceremonial opening of Munich University, 1826. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich

23 A variety of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century occupations. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, Kupferstichkabinett

24 Barricades in Berlin, 1848. Source: Gutskow, Unter dem schwarzen Bären

25 Borsig’s locomotive factory in Moabit, Berlin, 1855. Landesarchiv Berlin, Landesbildstelle

26 A selection of contemporary cartoons about Bismarck. Source: Ullstein’s Weltgeschichte

27 A cartoon of working-class life by the Berlin artist Heinrich Zille

28 The latest in ladies’ bicycling fashion, as illustrated in the popular middle-class magazine, Die Gartenlaube. Source: Karin Helm (ed.), Rosinen aus der Gartenlaube (Gütersloh: Signum Verlag, n.d.)

29 Barricades in Berlin, March 1919. Landesarchiv Berlin, Landesbildstelle

30 The Free Corps Werdenfels, in Munich to suppress revolutionary uprisings. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich

31 The Kapp Putsch. Soldiers march into Berlin, March 1920. Landesarchiv Berlin, Landesbildstelle

32 A peasant wedding in Bad Tölz, Bavaria. Source: Deutschland Bild-Heft Nr. 117: ‘Bad Tölz und das Land im Isar-Winkel’ (Berlin-Tempelhof: Universum-Verlagsanstalt, c. 1933)

33 A 1932 election poster for Hindenburg. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich
### List of illustrations

34 The Berlin rent strike of 1932. Landesarchiv Berlin, Landesbildstelle  

35 Propaganda for Hitler celebrating the ‘Day of Potsdam’. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich  

36 A delegation of the Nazi girls’ organisation honours the Nazi heroes who fell in the 1923 putsch. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich  

37 The Austrian town of Lienz changes the name of one of its major squares to ‘Adolf-Hitler-Platz’. Source: contemporary postcard in the possession of the author  

38 The Jewish ghetto in Radom, Poland. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich  

39 Auschwitz-Birkenau casts a shadow over German history which cannot be erased. Photo by the author, 1988  

40 The Berlin Wall starts to go up, August 1961. Landesarchiv Berlin, Landesbildstelle  

41 People hack out mementoes from the now defunct Berlin Wall. Photo: Cornelia Usborne  

### Maps

1 The division of the Frankish Kingdom at the Treaty of Verdun, 843  

2 The German Empire, c. 1024–1125  

3 Europe at the time of the Reformation  

4 Germany after the Peace of Westphalia, 1648  

5 The growth of Brandenburg-Prussia to 1786  


7 Development of the Prussian–German Customs Union  

8 The unification of Germany, 1867–71. (After Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*)
## List of illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Territorial annexations by Nazi Germany, 1935–9. (After Freeman, <em>Atlas of Nazi Germany</em>)</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The partition of Poland in 1939. (After Freeman, <em>Atlas of Nazi Germany</em>)</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hitler’s empire by autumn 1942. (After Freeman, <em>Atlas of Nazi Germany</em>)</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Divided Germany after 1945. (After Hughes, <em>Nationalism and Society</em>)</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A book such as this is infinitely easier to criticise than to write. The attempt to compress over a thousand years of highly complex history into a brief volume will inevitably provoke squeals of protest from countless specialists, who see their own particular patches distorted, constrained, misrepresented, even ignored. Yet a brief history of such a large topic can make no attempt at comprehensiveness. At best it can provide an intelligent guide to the broad sweep of developments.

These limitations are indeed partly inherent in the nature of historical writing, which cannot be a simple matter of recounting an agreed narrative, but rather must be a process of imposing an order on the mass of material – and on the interpretations of that material – which comes to us from the past. But it is particularly the case for a concise history of Germany that some brutal decisions about selection and omission have had to be made. While readers will all have their own views on the matter, the author has had to make particular choices. In terms of space devoted to different periods, the book operates on the landscape principle: things nearer to the observer loom larger, are perceived in closer detail, than the mistier general views of the distant horizons. Thus chapters generally deal with progressively shorter periods of time as the present is neared. Within the general landscape surveyed some features appear more important than others. The problem of ‘teleology’ is well known to historians: there is a tendency to notice particularly features pointing towards the present, explaining developments partly in terms of
their consequences (whether or not participants were aware of their ‘contributions’ to historical ‘progress’), and to ignore turnings that led nowhere. While there has been a healthy reaction against this in recent historical writing, it is still the case that certain developments appear more important from the point of view of current concerns than do others. And all authors inevitably have their own particular interests, enthusiasms and blind spots, however hard they try to be balanced and objective in coverage. There is also the particular problem, in relation to the history of ‘Germany’, of the limits of what is held to be its proper subject matter. In this volume the history of Austria has had to be considered only insofar as it was an integral part of ‘Germany’ at different times, or interrelated with the history of modern Germany since 1871. Austria, while perhaps the most obvious, is not the only area to suffer in this way: the boundaries of ‘Germany’ have been extremely changeable over the centuries.

A wide-ranging work such as this must rely heavily on researches undertaken by others, and represent a synthesis of existing knowledge and often quite conflicting views, while yet developing a coherent overall account. The author is painfully aware of gaps and inadequacies in the present analysis, but hopes at least that in presenting a broad framework which spans the centuries two useful purposes will have been accomplished. This book may present a basis and stimulus for subsequent more detailed exploration of particular aspects; it may also serve to locate existing knowledge and interests of readers within a wider interpretive framework. The book is intended as a form of large-scale map which can be used as a context for finer investigation of details along the way.

I am tremendously grateful to my colleagues and friends who have read and made valuable comments on parts of the manuscript, saving me from factual errors and inappropriate interpretations. I would like in particular to thank the following for their painstaking efforts to improve the text: David Blackbourn; Ian Kershaw; Timothy McFarland; Rudolf Muhs; Hamish Scott; Bob Scribner; Jill Stephenson; Martin Swales. Obviously, I alone am responsible for the inadequacies which remain. The work benefited from a small grant from the UCL Dean’s Fund enabling me to spend some time combing libraries, museums and archives for suitable illustrative
material. The choice of appropriate illustrations was almost as difficult as the construction of the text, and raised as many problems of selection, interpretation and omission. Discerning readers will notice that illustrations of personalities and familiar sights have generally been demoted in favour of representation of broader themes and more remote periods or places. Finally, I would also like to thank my husband and my three children for being willing to spend innumerable summers wandering around central Europe in search of aspects of the German past.

**Preface to the updated edition (1992)**

First of all, I would like to thank Dr Werner Schochow of Berlin for pointing out to me some errors of detail which crept unnoticed into the first edition, and for suggesting certain amendments to the index. I am extremely grateful to him for his close and careful reading of the text, and the trouble he took in providing detailed comments and suggestions.

I have also taken the opportunity to put discussion of West Germany into the past tense (East Germany having already suffered that fate at the time of the first edition). While much of what was ‘West Germany’ has of course passed over into the enlarged Federal Republic after unification in 1990, nevertheless united Germany is a new entity, and it would be prejudging its development in a quite a-historical fashion to suggest that what was true of the pre-1990 Federal Republic will continue to obtain in the new, rather lop-sided united Federal Republic, which faces both new domestic challenges and a changed European context.

Mary Fulbrook
London, October 1991

**Preface to the second edition (2004)**

For the Second Edition, I have made a number of minor changes throughout the text, to reflect the changing viewpoints of the present, and the implications of recent scholarship. A new chapter
Preface

has been added on Germany since 1990. The bibliography has been drastically pruned and substantially updated. But I have chosen not to tinker dramatically with the main body of the book, which has now proved its usefulness as an accessible overview for a wide range of readers across the English-speaking world and in a number of foreign translations.

Mary Fulbrook
London, March 2003