I

Introduction: the German lands and people

In a famous and much-quoted verse, those two most renowned German writers, Goethe and Schiller, posed the question which has been at the heart of much German history: 'Deutschland? aber wo liegt es? Ich weiss das Land nicht zu finden.' ('Germany? But where is it? I know not how to find the country.') They went on to put their finger succinctly on a further problem of the Germans: 'Zur *Nation* euch zu bilden, ihr hoffet es, Deutsche, vergebens; / Bildet, ihr könnt es, dafür freier zu Menschen euch aus.' ('Any hope of forming yourselves into a *nation*, Germans, is in vain; develop yourselves rather – you can do it – more freely as human beings!') Between them, these quotations encapsulate perhaps the most widespread general notions about Germany and the Germans – although of course Goethe and Schiller could hardly foresee, let alone be held responsible for, what was to come. A belated nation, which became unified too late, and a nation, at that, of 'thinkers and poets' who separated the freedom of the sphere of the spirit from the public sphere and the powers of the state; a nation which, notoriously, eventually gave rise – whatever its contributions in literature and music – to the epitome of evil in the genocidal rule of Adolf Hitler. A nation with an arguably uniquely creative culture and uniquely destructive political history; a nation uniquely problematic, tormented, peculiar, with its own strange, distorted pattern of history. And a nation uniquely efficient, in every transformation becoming a 'model' of its kind.

As with all platitudes, there is some element of truth in these generalisations; and as with all generalisations, there is much which is

oversimplified, misleading, and downright wrong. Perhaps the most misleading aspect of all these statements is the underlying assumption that there is some simple entity, the 'Germans', who have an enduring national identity revealing itself over the ages in all the twists and turns of a tortuous national history. The realities are infinitely more complex. There is a geographical complexity, with a range of peoples speaking variants of the German language across a central European area, in which over the centuries there has been a great diversity of political forms, which have for most of 'Germany's' history included also non-German-speaking peoples. There is a historical complexity, with as much contingency and accident as predetermined drive along any evolutionary path to a pre-ordained end. And there is the complexity inherent in the nature of reconstructing and writing a history of a shifting entity, itself constituted in the light of current concerns and interest. For many people, recent times will appear infinitely the most interesting; remoter periods will remain – for all but the few, fascinated by a far-removed culture – by way of a 'background', a setting of the scene, to know what the situation was 'when the story began'. Even a decision about the latter, the starting point, is to some extent arbitrary. All reconstructed history is a human construction from the perspective of certain interests, conscious or otherwise.

For most English-speaking people until 1989, 'Germany' would have meant the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany, with its capital in Bonn. To others, the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany, would be included, created as it was out of the ruins of defeated Nazi Germany. Most people today would not even think of Austria, let alone Switzerland, as candidates for being included in 'Germany'; yet it was only in 1871 that Austria was excluded from the unified 'small Germany', under Prussian domination, of Imperial Germany. German-speaking Switzerland separated, even from the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation', many centuries earlier. And, of course, there are other areas in central Europe which were either previously included in some German states – as, for example, those former German territories now in Poland and Russia – or where there were or are substantial German-speaking minorities under other governments. For some historians, Germany's politically and geographically insecure and contested central European location – *mitten in Europa* – has indeed been
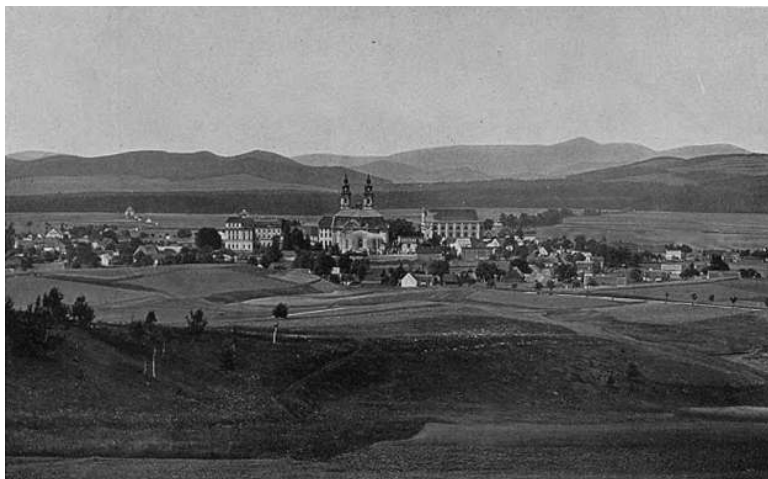
Plate 1. Kloster Grüssau in Silesia. Since 1945 part of Poland, Silesia was a province of Habsburg Austria until it was seized by Prussia in 1740–42. Central European boundaries have been very fluctuating over the centuries.

elevated to a central interpretive factor in 'German' history and identity. It certainly makes a clear definition of the subject of study more complex than is the case for many 'national' histories. While the ultimate landing stage of this book will be the united Germany formed in 1990 from the two Germanies of the late twentieth century – the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany – much else will need to be considered along the way, with a flexibility of focus and boundary.

The areas covered by Germany in the twenty-first century include many striking regional variations, based partly in topography and geography, partly in historical differences. Topographically, the German lands stretch from the sandy coasts of the North Sea and Baltic Sea, with their trading ports, through the heathy North German plain; then, broken by the hillier country of the Central German Uplands (as in the Harz mountains, or the Erzgebirge), down through the gentle undulations of southern Germany to the foothills of the Alps on the borders with Austria and Switzerland. The climate varies from the mild, wet Atlantic climate of the north and west to a drier, more continental climate, with cold, snowy winters and hot summers punctuated by frequent thunderstorms, in

the south and east. Natural resources are variable: there are con-
siderable deposits of the inferior lignite (brown coal) in eastern
Germany, which produces about a third of the world's total pro-
duction, whereas in western Germany bituminous coal is mined in
greater quantities, particularly in the Ruhr area. Germany has small
amounts of natural gas and oil, insufficient for current energy needs,
and is reliant also on controversial nuclear power production. There
are variable, but not extensive, mineral deposits (iron ore, lead, zinc,
potash salts). Soils and farming conditions vary: in many areas, the
land is left as heath or forest rather than being put to grain produc-
tion or pasture. In the 1980s, the population of West Germany was
slightly over 61 million, while that of East Germany was somewhat
under 17 million; in 1990, the population of united Germany was
78.3 million.

Historically, formed as they are of regions which had their own
existence as independent provinces or principalities in the past, the
German lands show striking regional variations based more in po-
litical, cultural and socioeconomic history than in geography. What
will strike the visitor to Germany are the results of human occu-
pation, human use of the environment, human beliefs, practices
and social relationships: mediaeval walled towns and castles, great
baroque churches and monasteries, princely palaces, different styles
of farm house, burgher house, or industrial slum. Regional stereo-
types abound: Prussian Protestant asceticism, militarism and con-
servatism is often contrasted with Hamburg liberalism or with the
more expansive mode of the Catholic, beer-swilling, unintelligible
Bavarians. There is a great variety of regional accents and cultures
still to be found in the more cosmopolitan and centralised Germany
of the late twentieth century. Even those with only a casual acquain-
tance will be aware of differences between the Rhineland, with its
castles and vineyards, the industrial Ruhr (no longer belching the
smoke and fumes it used to do before the shift to high-tech industries
in south-western Germany), the forests, streams and cuckoo-clock
attractions of the Black Forest, or the lakes and Alpine pastures of
Upper Bavaria. Fewer casual tourists will be familiar with the north-
ern coasts, the Frisian islands or the lakes and waters of Schleswig-
Holstein, although they may have visited Bremen, Hamburg and
Lübeck; most will have sped through the rolling Westphalian hills

Plate 2. A crucifix near Jachenau, in southern Bavaria. With its carved wooden 'curtains', this is a particularly splendid example of Catholic popular piety. In some predominantly Protestant areas of Germany, such as Württemberg, small patches of territory rich in crucifixes testify to a long-distant past when they might have been, for example, fiefs of the Catholic Austrian Habsburgs.

on a fast autobahn, bypassing the Lüneberg heath to the north or
the mediaeval attractions tucked away in the Harz mountains; very
few will have explored the forgotten communities in the Bohemian
border country and the Bavarian forest on the Czech border, or be
aware of quite local differences between such regions as the Spessart,
the Kraichgau or the Odenwald. Many will know the major urban
centres, particularly cities such as Munich, Nuremberg, Frankfurt,
Stuttgart, Cologne, but will have little idea about the reasons for
the decentralised nature of pre-1990 West German urban life (with
its capital, Bonn, so easily dismissed as 'a small town in Germany');
before the revolutionary events of autumn 1989, very few west-
ern visitors would have penetrated further into East Germany than
a day trip to its capital, East Berlin. Eastern Germany, although
smaller than the western areas of Germany, evinces a comparable
regional variation: from the sand dunes of the Baltic coast in the
north, through the sparsely populated lake country of Mecklenburg,
down to the varied regions of the hillier southern areas, including in-
dustrial centres such as Halle, Leipzig, Erfurt and Chemnitz, major
cultural centres such as Dresden and Weimar, and tourist attractions
in Saxon Switzerland, the Thuringian forest, or the Harz mountains.
All these regions differ for a multitude of reasons beyond purely to-
pographical factors such as proximity to rivers, sea or mountains.
Economically, they have been developed and exploited in different
ways and become involved as different elements in wider economic
systems. Culturally, the differences between Catholic and Protestant
areas in the confessionalised states of post-Reformation Germany
endured and had a profound impact over the centuries. Politically,
the histories of the different regions experienced a myriad of forms,
a veritable laboratory for the historically oriented political scientist.
All these varied influences have left their imprint on the more ho-
mogenised industrial Germany of today.

For most visitors before 1989, it would have been almost impos-
sible to imagine away what was perhaps the most striking feature
of the two Germanies: the fiercely guarded frontier running down
between the Germanies from the Baltic to the Czech border with
southern Germany, dividing not only East and West Germany but
also East and West Europe, communism and capitalism, democratic
centralism and liberal democracy, symbolising the international rifts
of the second half of the twentieth century – in Churchill's phrase,

Plate 3. The view towards Alexanderplatz in East Berlin in the 1980s. At the end, the television tower dwarfs the Marienkirche; on the left, the rebuilt Cathedral faced the new East German 'Palace of the Republic', built on the site of the former Royal Palace, on the right.

the 'Iron Curtain'. This border not only snaked down along miles of frontier between the two Germanies, with a no-man's land dividing formerly close communities, cutting them off from natural hinterlands; it also cut right through the very heart of that former magnificent metropolitan centre, the erstwhile capital of Prussia and of Imperial, Weimar and Nazi Germany, and now again of Germany since 1990: Berlin. Heavily armed guards monitored the highly restricted flow of traffic at the limited crossing points and ensured that no East German citizen left without permission. West Berlin, economically dependent and highly subsidised by the West German government, was also a city of self-advertising capitalism: vast department stores, bright lights, extravagant cultural performances, international conference centres, patronage of the arts. The old, turn-of-the-century slums, built as the Imperial capital rapidly expanded, by the 1980s housed not only the still surviving working-class Berliners, but also a large number of foreign 'guest workers' as well as a range of groups cultivating 'alternative' life styles in a variety of ways. In amongst all this, there was the inevitable pervasion

of military presence – Berlin was still formally a city under four-power control – and even when escaping to the remarkable natural resources of the lakes and forests in West Berlin, there was the om-nipresence of the Wall. Only a few yards away, across the Wall, there was a very different Berlin: 'Berlin, capital of the GDR', as was so proudly proclaimed on every signpost. Less empty of traffic than in earlier decades, East Berlin covered the heart of the old Imperial cap-ital: new East German public buildings, as well as mass-produced apartment blocks, jostled with the crumbling splendours of the old political and cultural centres. Whatever the East German attempts to promote a comparably – but differently – attractive image to that of the west, in areas such as the modern Alexanderplatz, much of East Berlin had a drab, dusty, old-fashioned air. The two Berlins, in extreme forms, epitomised and symbolised many of the strengths and weaknesses of the two socioeconomic and political systems for which they served as representatives.

And, in a dramatic fashion, the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 symbolised the passing of an era. With the revo-lutionary changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the 'Iron Curtain' began to crumble. As communist rule collapsed in the East, economic and political pressures combined to produce the unexpectedly rapid, unprecedented unification of two very different systems and societies in October 1990. For observers of the new, united Germany of the early twenty-first century, history takes on a new significance, as once again – as so many times over the centuries – the issue of Germany's character, form, and role in Europe and the world gains prominence. Yet with the end of the Cold War the character of world alignments and tensions changed too. With international terrorism and new conflicts, the 'German problem' came to be seen in a very different light.

So much for initial appearances and observations. There is much more to German history, society, culture and political life than can be gained from travelling impressions. There are, too, many aspects of the German past which have been neglected, repressed, transformed, or simply ignored. We must now begin to explore the broad outlines of the twists and turns of German history which have led to the Germany we see today.