

THE COURSE OF
GERMAN
HISTORY
A.J.P. TAYLOR



THE COURSE OF GERMAN HISTORY

A Survey of
the Development of German History
since 1815 by

A. J. P. TAYLOR
F.B.A.

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Preface [1961]

THIS BOOK WAS written in the last days of the second World war. It had a curious origin. The chapter on the Weimar republic was written as a separate piece to be included in one of the many compilations which were being put together in order to explain to the conquerors what sort of country they were conquering. My piece proved unacceptable; it was, I learnt, too depressing. The Germans were enthusiastic for a demagogic dictator and engaged on a war for the domination of Europe. But I ought to have shown that this was a bit of bad luck, and that all Germans other than a few wicked men were bubbling over with enthusiasm for democracy or for Christianity or for some other noble cause which would turn them into acceptable allies once we had liberated them from their tyrants. This seemed to me unlikely. I therefore went further back into German history to see whether it confirmed the argument of my rejected chapter; and this book was the result. It was an attempt to plot the course of German history; and it shows that it was no more a mistake for the German people to end up with Hitler than it is an accident when a river flows into the sea, though the process is, I daresay, unpleasant for the fresh water. Nothing, it seems to me, has happened since to disturb the conclusions at which I then arrived.

When the book appeared, some reviewers expostulated that it 'indicted' a nation and that no country's history could survive such hostile scrutiny. I made no indictment; the facts made it for themselves. Indeed I left many of the worst facts out of the reckoning. There is little in my book about the Nazi terror, and nothing about the policy of mass extermination which brought death to some seventeen million innocent people during the second World war. Far from treating the Germans as barbarians or eternal aggressors, I was anxious to discover why a nation so highly civilized in most ways should have failed to develop political balance. On almost every test of civilization – philosophy, music, science, local government – the Germans come out at the top of the list; only the art of

political behaviour has been beyond them. English writers give little help towards explaining this mystery. They have never recovered from the shock of learning that the victory of German nationalism was not followed by the beneficent results which were expected in the middle of the nineteenth century. German writers have been of more use; and my book, far from being unsympathetic towards Germany, is derived almost entirely from criticisms formulated by Germans themselves. Meinecke, for instance, once an admirer of Bismarck, confessed towards the end of his life that civilized Germans had been too passive about public affairs; they assumed that civilized life and the rule of law would be automatically provided for them by their irresponsible rulers without effort on their side. Rosenberg has claimed, perhaps even with some exaggeration, that the German working-classes abandoned the struggle for social democracy, once they were given economic security.

These writers, however critical, have one great handicap. They see the German problem as something wholly internal and are hardly aware that Germany's greatest problem has been to find a settled place in Europe. It is an advantage, and a rare one, for a writer on German history to be an Englishman, not educated in Germany; this advantage at any rate I possess. The key to Germany's past is to be found in her relations with her neighbours – predominantly defensive towards the west, always aggressive towards the east. For the last fifty years or more we in the west have seen only the formidable bulk and unity of the seventy or eighty million Germans, and have failed to realize how they would be overshadowed when the two hundred and fifty million Slavs stood on their own feet, economically and politically. The Germans have appreciated this cloud in the east, more and more vividly, during the course of the last century; this fear underlay their plans for conquest and extermination. No German of political consequence thought of accepting the Slavs as equals and living at peace with them; nor does the revisionist campaign against Czechoslovakia and Poland in western Germany suggest that their outlook has changed. Of course many Germans never think about the Slavs at all. These are the 'good Germans' who obtrude into every discussion of the German question, their 'goodness' being synonymous with ineffectiveness. The historian cannot deal with the politically impotent except in so far as their dead weight is thrown into the scales by more agile and

positive forces. This book deals with what happened in Germany. It cannot therefore deal, except by implication, with those Germans who regretted what was happening, and – having regretted – participated. There were, and I daresay are, many millions of well-meaning kindly Germans; but what have they added up to politically?

This book attempts to answer the historian's question – how did this state of things come about? It does not pretend to answer the politician's question – how can this state be remedied? The historian does not deal in remedies. He thinks of the next stage in a process of conflicting forces, not of a 'solution'. At best he can record that certain 'solutions' have been tried and have succeeded or failed; this is useful though not decisive evidence that they might succeed or fail in the future. The German problem has two sides. How can the peoples of Europe be secured against repeated bouts of German aggression? And, how can the Germans discover a settled, peaceful form of political existence? The first problem revolves round the behaviour of others, not of the Germans; and is capable of solution. Germany is in the centre of Europe and has scored repeated successes by playing off her neighbours to east and west. If these neighbours are united, or even on reasonably good terms, the Germans will not be able to harm us or even themselves. The friendship between east and west did not long survive the second World war. All the same we have had a stroke of luck. The former allies remained in occupation of the parts of Germany which they had respectively conquered; and we reverted by accident to the old device of a divided Germany which saved Europe trouble over many centuries. It is not a good solution, and it is unlikely to be permanent; but it is better than none at all. The partitioning Powers profess to regret the division of Germany, and even claim to be working for her reunion; but I suspect that they encourage each other's obstinacy behind the scenes, appreciating that things could be much worse. Of course nowadays we officially deplore any suggestion that precautions against a new German aggression are necessary, or ever will be, and the German problem is posed in a different form: how can we build up Germany as a Great Power and use her as an ally against the Soviet Union without risk to ourselves? The answer is simple: it is not possible, and those who attempt the impossible will sooner or later pay the price. Preserving the present situation is the kindest policy towards the Germans themselves. For

only a divided Germany can be a free Germany. A reunited Germany would cease to be free: either it would become a militaristic state in order to resume the march towards European domination, or its power would be compulsorily reduced by foreign interference, if the former allies had the sense to come together again in time. The flourishing state of Germany at present, particularly in the west, is evidence that disunion does not bring decay; on the contrary, disunion is the cause of Germany's prosperity. The victorious allies have done much better for Germany, despite their quarrels, after the second World war than after the first. Fifteen years after their first defeat the Germans were taking the hat round from one European capital to another; fifteen years after their second the Germans are casually considering whether to bestow a fraction of their charity on the Americans.

There was a great pothole after the war about how we should educate the Germans in democracy. I never understood how this should be done. Democracy is learnt by practice, not by sitting on forms at a political finishing-school. Our only contribution should have been to ensure that the Germans did not 'solve' their problem at the expense of others; and the Western Powers would have done more for German democracy if they had given a firm recognition to the Oder-Neisse frontier with Poland than they did with all their political admonitions. However the general prosperity of the western world has been another stroke of luck for us; and maybe the Germans will forget their imperialist dreams so long as they remain prosperous also. I have almost reached the point of believing that I shall not live to see a third German war; but events have an awkward trick of running in the wrong direction, just when you least expect it.

This book deals predominantly with the German *Reich* in its narrower sense – the Little Germany which Bismarck set up in 1871. This is lopsided. Austria did not cease to be part of the German question when she was excluded from the political system of Germany in 1866. The survival of the Habsburg monarchy; support for it in war; the relations of the German and Austrian republics in 1918; and the efforts both to promote and to resist the *Anschluss* which was achieved in 1938; all were an intrinsic part of the German question. The conflict between Czechs and Germans in Bohemia shaped German history almost as much as the conflict between Poles and

Germans in eastern Prussia. My excuse for passing over these things is that I published a history of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1949. It and the present book are complementary, one not to be understood without the other. I have also written abruptly and somewhat cryptically about German foreign relations, particularly in the later years. Here, too, I can only offer as excuse other books of mine on international relations: *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918*, and *The Origins of the Second World War*. The observant reader will detect that my views have changed here and there; but, unlike many fire-eaters of the second World war, I have not gone so far as to stand on my head.

The manuscript of this book was completed in September 1944. It was published in England in July 1945. The last two paragraphs were added later so as to carry the record to what is still, surprisingly enough, the end of the story. I have put a few mistakes right for this present edition, and benefited here and there from later information. Substantially the book remains unchanged.

A. J. P. TAYLOR

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Divided Germany: The Legacy of the Holy Roman Empire

THE HISTORY OF the Germans is a history of extremes. It contains everything except moderation, and in the course of a thousand years the Germans have experienced everything except normality. They have dominated Europe, and they have been the helpless victims of the domination of others; they have enjoyed liberties unparalleled in Europe and they have fallen victim to despotisms equally without parallel; they have produced the most transcendental philosophers, the most spiritual musicians, and the most ruthless and unscrupulous politicians. 'German' has meant at one moment a being so sentimental, so trusting, so pious, as to be too good for this world; and at another a being so brutal, so unprincipled, so degraded, as to be not fit to live. Both descriptions are true: both types of German have existed not only at the same epoch, but in the same person. Only the normal person, not particularly good, not particularly bad, healthy, sane, moderate – he has never set his stamp on German history. Geographically the people of the centre, the Germans have never found a middle way of life, either in their thought or least of all in their politics. One looks in vain in their history for a *juste milieu*, for common sense – the two qualities which have distinguished France and England. Nothing is normal in German history except violent oscillations.

Certain permanent factors have, indeed, influenced German history, since the time when Charlemagne, by establishing the Holy Roman Empire, advanced German history from the stage of tribal legends. First was their geographic position. The Germans are the peoples of the north European plain, the people without a defined natural frontier. Without the sharp limit of mountain ranges, except at the Alps and the Bohemian mountains, the great plain is

intersected by four great rivers (Rhine, Elbe, Oder, Vistula), dividing lines sharp enough to split the German people up among themselves, not rigid enough to confine them within settled frontiers. There is no determined geographic point for German expansion, equally none for German contraction; and, in the course of a thousand years, geographic Germany has gone out and in like a concertina. At times Germany has been confined within the Rhine and the Elbe; at others it has blown itself out to the Pyrenees and to the Caucasus. Every German frontier is artificial, therefore impermanent; that is the permanence of German geography.

Enduring too for a thousand years has been their ethnographical position. Here too the Germans have been the people of the middle; always they have had two neighbours and have shown two faces. To their west was the Roman Empire and its heir, French civilization; to their east, the Slavs, new barbarians pressing on the Germans as the Germans pressed on Rome. To the west therefore the Germans have always appeared as barbarians, but the most civilized of barbarians, eager to learn, anxious to imitate; and the record of German civilization is a story of sedulous and exaggerated imitation of the established order in the west – an imitation which began with Charlemagne's apeing of Caësar and has ended in Hitler's apeing of Napoleon. To the Slavs of the east, however, the Germans have made a very different appearance: ostensibly the defenders of civilization, they have defended it as barbarians, employing the technical means of civilization, but not its spirit. For a thousand years, again from Charlemagne to Hitler, the Germans have been 'converting' the Slavs from paganism, from Orthodox Christianity, from Bolshevism, or merely from being Slavs; their weapons have varied, their method has always been the same – extermination. Most of the peoples of Europe have, at one time or another, been exterminators. The French exterminated the Albigensians in the thirteenth century and the Huguenots in the seventeenth; the Spaniards exterminated the Moors; the English exterminated the North-American Indians and attempted in the seventeenth century to exterminate the Irish. But no other people has pursued extermination as a permanent policy from generation to generation for a thousand years; and it is foolish to suppose that they have done so without adding something permanent to their national tradition. No one can understand the Germans who does not appreciate their

anxiety to learn from, and to imitate, the West; but equally no one can understand Germans who does not appreciate their determination to exterminate the East.

It may seem a platitude to count the German people as the third permanent factor in German history; but it is a platitude which is often overlooked. The German national state is new; but the consciousness of German national existence is old, certainly older than the consciousness of Spanish national existence, perhaps older than that of England or France. The Germans have been, for more than a thousand years, unmistakably a people; though that does not imply that they have always been the same sort of people. A political community has a way of life like a school or a trade union; and the individuals, so far as they are members of the community, are shaped by that way of life, even while they are helping to change it. 'National character' is the shorthand which the historian must use in order to express the effect on a community of geographical, political, and social surroundings. There has been a German 'national character' for more than a thousand years, a character not strictly identical, but recognizably the same. By the time of Charlemagne the Germans had settled down: from then on they were shaped by unchanging geographical circumstances, and by the political neighbourhood of the French on the one side and the Slavs on the other. The area of German settlement has been expanded, but never radically moved. There was never such a revolution as, in English history, the change from a small island off the coast of Europe to the centre of a great world empire. When, late in their history, the Germans talked of world empire, it was no more than a new version of the empire of Charlemagne. This routine has given to German history a pattern almost monotonous; of them, more truly than of most people, it may be said that there is nothing new under the sun. If a natural cataclysm had placed a broad sea between the Germans and the French, the German character would not have been dominated by militarism. If – a more conceivable possibility – the Germans had succeeded in exterminating their Slav neighbours, as the Anglo-Saxons in North America succeeded in exterminating the Indians, the effect would have been what it has been on the Americans: the Germans would have become advocates of brotherly love and international reconciliation. Constant surroundings shaped a German national character strong enough to withstand the

increasing changes in social circumstance which occurred in Germany in modern times.

For a thousand years also Germany has had a political form. The *Reich*, the political expression of the German people, is the oldest political organization in Europe, older than England, France, Hungary, or Poland; and therefore older by far than any other European state. Since the moment when Charlemagne founded the Reich in 800, there has never been a time when the Germans were without the framework of a political organization. For even when the old Reich was dissolved in 1806, its place was taken first by the Confederation of the Rhine and then by the German Confederation in 1815. The continuity of the Reich is obscured by a twofold paradox. First, at no time before 1933 did the political energies of the German people find their sole outlet in the Reich; for most of its thousand years more political energy went into maintaining German states independent of the Reich, or even hostile to it, than into the Reich itself. Secondly, at no time did the Reich coincide with the national existence of the German people; it has always either carried its frontiers far beyond the German national area or failed to include all Germans within its limits. A history of the French state would be, by and large, a political history of the French people; a history of the English state would certainly be a political history of the English people. But a history of the Reich would not coincide with a political history of the German people. In the early period it would bring too much in; in the later period it would shut too much out. Yet, apart from the Reich, the Germans have no continuous political history. The historian is presented with a problem of presentation almost impossible of solution.

The Empire which Charlemagne founded set the tone for German history from the beginning. It was not intended as a German national state; it claimed to be a universal Empire, a revival of the Empire of the Caesars. The revival did not come from the inhabitants of Rome, of Paris, or of Naples; it came from barbarians, whose only connection with the real empire was that their ancestors had helped to destroy it. The history of the Germans as a civilized people thus began with the deliberate, planned imitation of an institution which had never been theirs. The Empire claimed to be universal. Here too the Germans struck the same note from the beginning. Unlike other peoples, they did not start from their own

national state and gradually advance claims to domination: they demanded everything from the beginning. Most typical of all, this Empire – ostensibly the bulwark of Christian civilization and often accepted as such by the peoples of the West both then and since – inaugurated at once the policy of exterminating the Slav peoples of the East. Universalism, apeing of foreign traditions, ruthlessness towards the Slav peoples, these three things were to form the pattern of the Reich for more than a thousand years, and to compose the ‘national character’ of the German people. There was nothing innate or mysterious in this. The German character was determined by their geographical position: they were the barbarians on the edge of a great civilization. Hence their anxiety both to master this civilization and to imitate it; hence their barbaric ruthlessness towards the peoples who were pressing on them from behind. They were the people of the middle: dualism was dictated to them.

Charlemagne’s Empire claimed to be universal, and the Reich maintained the claim sometimes more and sometimes less resolutely for six hundred years thereafter. But from the first it was unmistakably a German institution, and became progressively more so. By the fifteenth century it had acquired the almost official title of the ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’ – a contradiction in terms which confesses the failure to become either universal or a German national state. It both gave and denied to the Germans a national existence. The Reich was the greatest of feudal organizations, and the ‘German Nation’ of its title included only the great feudatories, the secular and ecclesiastical princes and the Free Cities. The Emperors, in the intervals of pursuing their universalist ambitions, made spasmodic efforts for centuries to reduce the great feudatories to obedience; but their efforts never succeeded, and each failure left the feudal magnates a little nearer independence than they had been before. In particular, the universalist aims of the Emperor always brought him up against the Pope, with his more truly universal position; and the Pope in self-defence stirred up feudal insubordination in the Emperor’s rear. The position of Emperor remained theoretically elective, though certain great families established a hereditary series; and the greatest of these, the Hohenstaufen, might well have established a real monarchical power in Germany, had it not been for the distraction of their Italian adventures and the resultant conflicts with the Papacy.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century the prestige of the Emperors was at its lowest ebb; and one of a family which had dropped out of the Imperial running two hundred years before, the Habsburgs, was elected Emperor by the princes almost as a gesture of contempt – he was to be the despised holder of an empty title. But the Habsburgs were the greatest wielders in history of the strange political weapon of marriage; and within a century their successful marriages surrounded princely Germany on every side. Charles V, who was elected Emperor in 1519, hemmed Germany in with his family possessions – the Netherlands on the north-west, the Burgundian lands on the west, Milan on the south, and the reversion to Bohemia and Hungary to the south-east. In addition he was King of Spain, and so could draw on the wealth of the Indies for the subduing of the German princes. The moment for the decisive struggle against feudalism seemed to have come. Within Germany, everything called for a national king. The peoples both to the east and west of Germany, challenged by Imperial claims, had in answer created their own national states with unrestricted sovereignty: France and England on the one side, Poland, Hungary, and even Bohemia on the other, proclaimed the end of the middle ages and so spurred the Germans on to achieve their unification. In fact the task seemed easier for the Germans than for any other people. Everywhere the national states which overthrew the feudal order depended on the support of the urban trading classes; where, as in Poland, the trading classes were weak, the evolution was incomplete. Germany was at this time the life-line of European commerce, and her towns towered above all others in prosperity. Indeed the national monarchies in other countries sprang even more from resistance to the German commercial supremacy than from resistance to the Emperor. The trade of all Europe was poured by Venice into the funnel of the Rhine; and then was poured out from the great cities along the coast of the North Sea and the Baltic. These cities of the Rhine and of the Hanseatic League were ‘Germany’ – the Germany which had invented ‘burgher’ civilization and which led the world in all the arts of commerce. This Germany, proudly conscious of its national existence, now seemed eager to range itself behind a national king for the destruction of feudalism and the establishment of a national state.

Two great upheavals, one economic, one spiritual, abruptly

ended these high hopes. The great geographic discoveries ruined Germany almost overnight and destroyed the confidence of the German burghers; the Reformation, failing to conquer all Germany, created a lasting religious division. The opening of the Cape route to India caused an economic collapse in Germany, the effects of which lasted for three hundred years. From being the centre of world commerce, Germany became within a generation an economic backwater. Her markets outside Germany passed to others. The wealth of her great burghers vanished away. Her great trading towns dwindled in size, shrinking ever more meanly within the medieval walls which they had formerly outgrown. Every trading community experiences the ups and downs attendant on the world market; but no trading community in modern Europe has ever experienced such a profound and lasting disaster as did the German middle classes just at the moment when their financial power was at its greatest and their national consciousness fully asserted – just at the moment, indeed, when they might have been expected to become the dominating political force, as they were already the dominating economic force, in central Europe.

Germany of the first two decades of the sixteenth century was a Germany of great wealth, of high culture, assertively self-confident, standard-bearer of the Renaissance. High-water mark of Germany's great age was the assertion of a national and reformed religion, expressed in the enthusiasm for Luther which swept all parts and all classes of Germany in 1519 and 1520. This was the decisive moment of German history. Napoleon once said that if the Emperor Charles V had put himself at the head of German Protestantism in 1520 he would have created a united German nation and solved the German question. But the failure was more than personal: if German development had continued at its previous rate it would have created a united nation even against the Emperor and his universalist ideas. But the German impulse flagged with disastrous suddenness, and in none more rapidly than in Luther himself. From a resolute and irresistible popular leader, Luther suddenly became a timid mystic repudiating all connection with worldly affairs. The change was forced on Luther by the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. Luther had hastily to decide whether by the 'German nation' to which he had appealed he meant the German people or merely established authority, the princes. He decided in favour of the princes and