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INTRODUCTION

> The small circle of men who earlier were bound together harmoniously was really unique and in its human decency something I scarcely encountered again.
>
> *Einstein to Max von Laue, 1934, about their common past in Berlin*

> You ask about my attitude to Germany. . . . I can best express it metaphorically: I feel like a mother who sees that her favorite child has gone hopelessly astray.
>
> *Lise Meitner to a Dutch physicist friend, October 1945*

> A country of mass murderers.
>
> *Einstein to Max Born, October 12, 1953*

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It was in April 1979 in West Berlin. Raymond Aron and I were walking to an exhibit commemorating the centenary of the births of Einstein, Max von Laue, Otto Hahn, and Lise Meitner. We were passing bombed-out squares and half-decrepit mansions of a once proud capital, our thoughts already at the exhibit, when Aron suddenly stopped at a crossing, turned to me, and said, "It could have been Germany's Century." Aron, French scholar and Jew who had studied in Berlin in the early 1930s and had seen German promise turn to nemesis, mused on what might have been. In the ensuing years I have extended my studies of German scientists, of German creativity and destruction, which I had already begun then. In preparing this work on Einstein's German world for publication twenty years

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later, I recognize the resonance of the theme that Aron had so casually, so memorably set.

In the history of modern Europe, there has always been a preeminent power—successively Spain, France, Holland, Britain—a nation that combined material strength with cultural greatness. In the three decades before the Great War, Germany was the country in ascendancy, and its physical power, with its strident militaristic ethos, seemed to be balanced by cultural, especially scientific achievement. This was Germany's first chance to achieve European preeminence. The only other country at the time growing with similar dynamic energy was the United States, it too marked by immense material power, embarked on an imperial course, and exemplary in the promotion of scientific-technological innovation. The German theologian and academic statesman Adolf von Harnack was right when he said in 1907: "Geographically America is for us among civilized countries the most distant; intellectually and spiritually, however, the closest and most like us." In the twentieth century these two powers had violent alternations of intimacy and enmity; the American Century began as the German one ended. And for the last half of this century, historians have tried to understand the German question. Increasingly they have sought their answers in what I have always believed is its inescapable context, Europe, a context I now happily realize includes the United States as well. This book is part of that quest.

In the late eighteenth century a cultural renaissance erupted in the German lands; Europeans, in awe of artistic and philosophic achievements, began to speak of Germany as a land of poets and thinkers. Germans themselves referred to that period, roughly 1770–1830, as the Age of Genius, the *Geniezeit*. (For Germans, the word *Genie* has a special ring, denoting creative powers of demonic magnitude.) By the mid-nineteenth century in economic terms, after 1871 and unification in political terms, and by the end of the century in scientific-technological terms—Germany was transformed into a country of

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doers and innovators, of world-renowned natural scientists still steeped in Germany's humanistic culture. The very names of Einstein, Ehrlich, Planck, and Haber—and the extended and sometimes fractious family of scientists among whom they lived and worked—evoke the greatness of this period, expressed as it was also in German culture more broadly defined, when German writers and artists had the intuition of uneasy modernity. This might be called Germany's second *Geniezeit*, one fraught with danger.

Einstein's German world illustrates the ambiguities of German greatness—even before the Great War began the nation's process of stoppable self-destruction. We see clusters of excellence in the lives of some of its representative individuals; they were imbued with a faith in science that was then still innocent, a faith akin to religion; they were shielded by ties of friendship, supported by a disciplined society, driven by organized ambition, empowered by an unrivaled educational system.* German science and German society were intricately linked—hence the historian may justifiably pay heed to the nonscientific aspects of the scientists' lives.

By the late nineteenth century, Germany had developed an academic-industrial and, later, military complex that was supported and sustained by its authoritarian state, whose leaders combined class-induced political myopia with a confident grasp of the immense utility of science. Fritz Haber, inventor of the process for the fixation of nitrogen from the air, was one of

* One of the great mathematicians of the century, Hermann Weyl, who had lived in that European milieu before coming to the United States, said much later, in 1946: "We may well envy the nineteenth century for the feeling of certainty and the pathos with which it praised the sacrosanctity and supreme value of science and the mind's dispassionate quest for truth and light. We are addicted to mathematical research with no less fervor. But for us, alas! its meaning and value are questioned . . . from the practical-social side by the deadly menace of its misuses." Skúli Sigurdsson, "Physics, Life, and Contingency: Born, Schrödinger, and Weyl in Exile," in Mitchell G. Ash and Alfons Söllner, eds., *Forced Migration and Scientific Change: Emigré German-Speaking Scientists and Scholars after 1933* (Washington, D.C., 1996), p. 68.

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the first German scientists to forge exceptionally close and profitable ties to German industry. In his and other scientists' lives we see the attractiveness of this new and dynamic Germany, and often an almost unreflective subservience to the state. In the case of Einstein, there was a distaste for Germany's authoritarian militarism, whose most aggressive elements became dominant in the Great War and survived after Germany's defeat, in infinitely more embittered fashion, subverting the brave attempts to build a German democracy on the ruins of the old empire. Einstein's comprehensive yet simplistic hostility to what might be called the official Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm's times, like his experience of nationalist rage in Weimar Germany, had an analogue in the deep anxiety over Germany's political capability expressed by self-conscious patriots such as Walther Rathenau, Max Weber, and the theologian Ernst Troeltsch.

Put too simply, Germany's elites—most especially the materially declining old agrarian-feudal class, many of the rising captains of industry and banking, and the professoriate—saw themselves as guardians of the nation's special character; they thought or imagined that Germany was beset by a ring of external enemies, and more importantly by internal enemies. The mounting tide of Social Democracy seemed to them to threaten their values, their privilege, their property.* Only a nation so internally divided could have welcomed the outbreak of war in 1914 with the extravagant hope that war would unify its

* There were many exceptions, of course. Consider one: Robert Bosch, born in 1861, founder of the Bosch concern that still today furnishes almost every automobile with electric or electronic devices, who in 1883–84 was in the United States and wrote his bride back home: "You see, I am a Socialist. . . . Socialism is something Great and Noble, and to understand it completely . . . you need volumes of books that exist but that our government prohibits and hence they are not easily accessible." Bosch may have been the only person to have learned socialism in America; he translated youthful sentiment into mature action; in 1906 he introduced the eight-hour day and paid vacations for his workers—and earned from his fellow industrialists the sobriquet "the red Bosch." Theodor Heuss, *Robert Bosch* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1948), pp. 63, 66–67.

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people through sacrifice. Instead, the long war—conducted on the German side under ever more radical leadership—bred an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust that, upon Germany's defeat, erupted into both actual and latent civil war. Rathenau's life and his assassination in 1922 exemplify the travails of the postwar Weimar Republic, the impressive efforts made to salvage German promise that finally the horror of National Socialism totally perverted.

Einstein's German world was one in which Christians and Jews (or individuals of Jewish descent) lived and worked together; in the relatively protected realm of science, prejudice against Jews gradually yielded to a recognition of talent and of shared values. (In the Protestant states of Germany, Catholics probably fared worse than Jews—and the conflict between the two Christian religions ran very deep.) German society as a whole was rife with every kind of prejudice—anti-Semitism came in the most diverse guises—from irritation at Jewish success to paranoid fear and fury at the thought of Jewish power threatening German life and virtue. So while German Jews before 1914 prospered in spite of and sometimes even because of these rampant prejudices, they did so at great psychic cost, as the lives of Haber and Rathenau make clear. In no other country were Jews met with so peculiar a mixture of hospitality and hostility, while being so attracted to a country that in many ways treated them—still or forever more?—as second-class citizens. Chaim Weizmann had contempt for what he regarded as ignoble servility and wanted to deliver Jews from it. The full range of Jewish responses to German life before Hitler emerges in these various lives, as does the still terrifying failure of the German elites to resist Hitler's march to total power. That failure was the precondition of Nazi success.

On earlier occasions I have acknowledged that I find the essay a particularly congenial mode: it allows for a more speculative, a more tentative tone, for a more personal voice. Some of the essays in this book were originally given in the form of

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lectures; some of them involved extensive study in private and public archives on three continents, a journey of discovery that was a pleasure in itself. My focus is largely biographical; I have tried to find the points where private lives and public realms intersect that illuminate them both. In a life like Planck's we see the collision between the commands of personal integrity and the commands of criminal political power.

The work of historians, their spoken and unspoken premises, have been an abiding interest of mine. We know that history is both a science—or an academic discipline—and an art, that the very openness of the past and the role of contingency within it demand analytical and imaginative judgment, both of which are affected by the historians' engagement with their own times. Hence my concern with the response of major historians to the experience of the Great War: their interpretations influenced the development of the discipline itself and, as always, they helped to mold a people's collective memory; their work is often a political datum. Beyond obeying the austere demands of their professional discipline, historians bear a moral responsibility, and the greater the reach, the heavier the responsibility.

The centrality and, eventually, the terror of German history in our century have made its study and interpretation compelling and infinitely complex. The record of German historians before Hitler—to say nothing of their record under Hitler—was largely dictated by nationalist imperatives and, in the Weimar years, by a studied avoidance of the self-critical inquiries that Germans often call fouling your own nest. Immediately after 1945, there was among German historians a wish to explain National Socialism as having been an aberration, an accident of German history.* Allied publicists—not historians—

* A mere example from the very beginning: in May 1945, Siegfried Kaehler, a conservative German historian who had kept his distance from National Socialism, wrote his son about Germany's fate, and about the German past that had been left intact by the defeat of 1918 but sullied and endangered by the "piedpiper" Hitler. "If universities should continue to exist, then our task will

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painted a similarly distorted picture in reverse, insisting that National Socialism was the very culmination of German history, a view that the National Socialists had themselves propagated. What has been achieved in the half-century since has been extraordinary: a gradual reexamination of German history and the place of National Socialism in it, beginning within Germany with the work of Karl-Dietrich Bracher in the mid-1950s and continuing with several generations of truly outstanding German historians, not to mention non-Germans such as Alan Bullock or Gordon Craig or James Sheehan, who have contributed so much to an understanding of the German past. These years have witnessed great historical debates, but they no longer run along nationalist lines; German history has been largely integrated into European and international history and freed from narrow ideological entrapments. A recent exception—Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*—has had the unusual fate of being sharply criticized by historians yet widely read by a public that seems to welcome simplistic answers to the most terrifying questions. I have included my own essay on this historiographical-political phenomenon.

Some of these essays bear a personal note. I caught glimpses of the world I wrote about, I learned from many conversations, I read candid letters of the past. Some of the lectures express my concern for those Germans who have committed themselves to build and preserve a liberal society and a democratic state, for the colleagues who with such acuity and professional energy have analyzed German history and have helped to build an international community of scholars.

In the same personal vein I have written of present-day events. I was thrilled by the world-historical transformation of

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be to preserve and protect the record of the true and real Germany against the calumnies, already begun, by democratic-Jewish propaganda and by Anglo-Saxon self-righteousness." Siegfried A. Kaehler, *Briefe 1900–1963*, ed. Walter Bussmann and Günther Grünthal (Boppard am Rhein, 1993), p. 300.

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1989 and the self-liberation of Eastern Europe, but I was concerned about the long-term psychological difficulties of uniting the peoples of two German states held apart for so long. I realized that formal unification gave Germany that rarest of opportunities, a second chance: this time to become the preeminent power of Europe in a peaceful fashion. To seize that chance would require rare feats of statesmanship and the recognition of the responsibilities of power. One instance of such statesmanship has been the belated reconciliation between Germany and Poland, to which I devote the final and most personal essay. "Lost Homelands" is an all-too-human experience of our collective past.

It has not been Germany's century—at least not in the sense that Aron meant that it might have been. But German terror, at its most savage in the Holocaust, haunts the moral imagination of all of us. It could not be otherwise. There are also lessons to be learned from the German catastrophe, one of which was intimated in a letter Lise Meitner wrote in 1945: "It is tragic," she remarked, "that even people like Laue and Otto [Hahn] did not understand to what fate their passivity delivered their own country." No country, no society, is shielded from the evils that the passivity of decent citizens can bring about. That is a German lesson of the twentieth century—for all of us.

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