This course explores the trajectory of German history during the past two centuries: from the monarchist and imperial regimes, the experiences of dictatorships in the Nazi era and Communist East Germany, and the gradual growth of democratic political culture, from the Weimar Republic to today’s unified Germany. The course provides an overview of historical change, with particular emphasis on political history, including the history and transformation of the state, conflicts of political ideologies, the role of national identity and nationalism, and the interaction between German national formation and international processes. Students will come to understand the origins of the political institutions of contemporary Germany and how they emerged from historical experience.

The center of the course is the examination of primary sources—historical documents—and scholarly analyses. In addition to exposing students to the trajectory of German history, the course also highlights how historical accounts, i.e., the narrative of history, depends on the interpretation of primary evidence.

The historical documents and some of the secondary sources will be in German, and the course will be conducted largely in German. It is open to students who have completed German 21 or a course at the 120 level. Students who have questions about the level of German language skills required are invited to contact the instructor.

Learning Goals:

Achieve a broad overview of the main contours of German history with regard to the development of concepts of nation, state, nationalism and national unity;

Develop the capacity to distinguish among competing ideological traditions, especially socialism, conservatism, communism and national socialism;

Become familiar working with original source materials and their relationship to historiographical writing

Improve German language skills through the reading of heterogeneous texts, participation in classroom discussion, and regular writing assignments.

Requirements:
In weeks 3, 5 and 7 short writings assignments (500 words) will be due on the respective prompts. They will be returned with comments, and rewrites will be due one week later.

During the last two weeks of the class, each student will make an oral presentation on a German historical topic of his or her choice. Be sure to discuss your topic with the instructor by week 5. The presentation should include an interpretation of a relevant document that should be distributed to the class in advance. The goal is to explore a topic of your interest more deeply while also demonstrating your ability to interpret historical evidence.

Week 1: “War of Liberation?” Prussia and the Fight Against Napoleon

By 1812, Napoleon had conquered much of Europe. As he faced defeat in Russia, stirrings of resistance to French rule emerged. This week’s texts document how Prussia and Germany joined the anti-Napoleonic forces. German historiography refers to this fight as the “Befreiungskrieg.”

Die Konvention von Tauroggen, December 30, 1812
Die Proklamation von Kalisch, March 25, 1813
Friedrich Wilhelm III, “Am Mein Volk,” March 17, 1813


Week 2: Conservatism, Radicalism, National Unification: the German 19th Century

Increasingly rapid economic development transformed German society as well as the political landscape. Friedrich Stahl was a founder of a modern conservatism in Germany which looked to the state to provide order, while Marx and Engels argued for a social revolution and were oddly dismissive of the state. Bismarck would eventually forge a political route to a unified German state, relying on “blood and iron,” rather than parliamentary process. Where are the dividing lines and points of intersections among these political visions?

Friedrich Julius Stahl, Das Wesen des Staates, 1837 (excerpts)
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifest der kommunistischen Partei, 1848 (excerpts)
Otto von Bismarck, “Blut-und-Eisen Rede,” 1862

Sheehan, “Conservatism and Liberalism, “589-603

Assignment: Compare the conservative and Marxist understandings of state and society, drawing on Stahl and Marx/Engels. What is the primary difference? Use quotations to defend your claim.

Week 3. The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914
The assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne on June 28, 1914 unleashed an international crisis during July, which quickly spiraled into the First World War. The mood in Germany was nationalistic and enthusiastic—as it was elsewhere—in stark contrast to experiences on the front, as these texts demonstrate.

Wilhelm II, “Thronrede,” August 4, 1914
Bethmann Hollweg, “Reichstagrede,” August 4, 1914
DominickRichert, “Frontbericht,” September, 1914
“Aufruf an die Kulturwelt,” October 4, 1914

Golo Mann, “Juli 1914,” 571-578

Week 4 The Weimar Republic: Competing Models of Democracy

As the war came to an end, mutinies and revolts in the military forces spread on the front, and revolutionary movements developed in Germany itself. The Kaiser’s reign came to an end, and on November 9 a republic was declared, in fact it was declared twice on the same day, as moderate and radical models came into play. It was not until August 1919 that the constitution of the Weimar Republic, Germany’s first democracy, was adopted.

Wilhelm II, “Abdankungsurkunde,” November 28, 1918
Philipp Scheidemann, Ausrufung der Republik,” November 9, 1918
Karl Liebknecht, Proklamation der sozialistischen Republik,” November 9, 1918
Die Verfassung des deutschen Reichs, August 11, 1919

Craig, “From Kiel to Kapp: the Aborted Revolution,” 396-414.

Assignment: Compare the two models of the republic. What values define the positions of Scheidemann and Liebknecht? Evaluate the Weimar constitution against this background.

Week 5. Nazi Germany: Dictatorship, Genocide and Resistance

Hitler came to power in January 1933 and set about dismantling the democratic structures of the Weimar Republic. A dictatorship was established that sought control of all aspects of political and social life through a process of Gleichschaltung. Key to the Nazi agenda was anti-Semitism and a genocidal policy. In his notorious speech to the Nazi leadership, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, spelled out the agenda for the Holocaust. While resistance to the Nazis was sparse, it was sometimes heroic, as documented in the flyers distributed in Munich by members of the “White Rose” student group.

Heinrich Himmler, Posner Rede, October 4, 1943
Flugblätter der “Weissen Rosen,” 1942-43

Reminder: By this week discuss your final project with the instructor and to describe it briefly in class.

Week 6. The Federal Republic of Germany: Democracy in West Germany

West German democracy was formed under the influence of the western occupying powers—the United States, England and France—but it also drew significantly on longer standing political traditions: from the labor movement past of the Social Democratic Party and a specific mixture of Catholic politics and Protestant conservatism that led to the Christian Democratic Union. The CDU has always partnered with its Bavarian counterpart, the Christian Social Union. How does the *Grundgesetz* or “Fundamental Law” resemble or differ from the US Constitution?

Kurt Schumacher, Erklärungen für die SPD, October 5, 1946
“Kölner Leitsätze der CDU,” September, 1945
Das Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, May 8, 1949

Mann, “Die Bundesrepublik,” 981-987

Assignment: How do post-war social democracy and conservatism, as evidenced in the documents for this week, echo older political traditions (Stahl vs. Marx/Engels, Scheidemann vs. Liebknecht)? How has the experience of Nazi Germany redefined the terms of German political thought expressed in the *Grundgesetz*?

Week 7. The German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Berlin Wall

The Soviet Occupation Zone became the GDR, part of Communist Eastern Europe. Just as Germany was divided, so was the city of Berlin, with a western and an eastern sector. Because the border between the two parts was porous, streams of East Germans passed over into the West in order to escape the conditions of life under the Communist regime. In August, 1961, the East German regime suddenly built a wall to prevent this population movement; people who tried to cross it were shot and killed, or if captured, they were tried for “Republikflucht.” It was an iconic site of the Cold War. Here is an East German police report of the population’s angry response to the building of the wall, and a speech by the GDR Prime Minister defending it.

Bericht über den Bau der Berliner Mauer, August 13, 1961
Walter Ulbricht, Ansprache, August 18, 1961

Week 8. The Opening of the Berlin Wall and the Path to Unified Germany

A complex combination of forces loosened the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe. Facing growing domestic demonstrations as well as changes in global politics, the GDR regime suddenly announced free passage across the Berlin Wall in November 1989. For a brief
period, GDR politicians and even dissident intellectuals explored the possibility of maintaining a separate, post-Communist GDR state, but the popular push for unification was too strong. The demonstrators who initially protested against the regime with the slogan “Wir sind das Volk” soon replaced it with “Wir sind ein Volk.” On October 3, 1990 the territory of the GDR was integrated into the Federal Republic. October 3 is now celebrated as “Tag der deutschen Einheit.”

Günter Schabowski, Pressekonferenz, November 9, 1989
Hans Modrow, Regierungserklärung, November 18, 1989
“Für Unser Land,” November 26, 1989

Weeks 9 and 10

Final Projects and Review

Readings:

All excerpts on the syllabus will be made available as PDFs. There are no required book purchases.

Sources for the Historical Accounts: