



# Easier Fatherland

GERMANY  
AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

STEVE CRAWSHAW

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books about  
postwar Germany  
... one feels one  
is eavesdropping  
on a nation  
painfully learning  
to live with itself'*

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*'... a most timely  
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JOHN LE CARRÉ



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For Ewa and Ania

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*‘Es gibt schwierige Vaterländer. Eins davon ist Deutschland.’*

‘There are difficult fatherlands. One of them is Germany.’

Gustav Heinemann,  
President of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1969–74



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## PREFACE

Germany in the twenty-first century is a country in flux – more now than at any time since 1945. Partly, that is the result of German unification in 1990. The fall of the Wall in 1989, German unity, and the end of Communism and the Cold War unleashed political earthquakes in Germany and across the continent. These upheavals paved the way for the more self-confident Germany that we see today – an important reason why many foreign politicians (and some Germans, too) were so frightened of the new Germany after the Wall came down. Unification removed the limits which the Allies had imposed on Germany and which Germany had imposed on itself after 1945.

Unity is, however, only one reason for the transformation of Germany that we see today. The generational change is crucial, too. Unification permitted the acceleration of a process already under way. *Easier Fatherland* tells the story of how German society has moved in the past 60 years, including dramatic changes in perceptions and memory – and how the country has gradually begun to become more comfortable with itself. The changes in attitude are greater than many non-Germans seem to believe, and perhaps greater than the Germans themselves acknowledge. We come to think of the beliefs of a democracy as more or less fixed; in reality, attitudes can change radically, and in a relatively short period of time.

The starting point for writing this book was a lecture that I was invited to give at the Goethe-Institut in London, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Federal Republic in 1999. The lecture was part of a series under the umbrella title ‘Germany, My Germany’. Each speaker in the series was, as the title implies, encouraged to give a personal view.

In focusing on that theme, it became clear to me just how different were the various Germanies which I wanted to describe. I have known and lived in different Germanies since 1968. My perception of the country is a composite of contrasting impressions at different times. Germany has changed radically – even while seeming not to do so. Those continuing changes formed part of the theme of *Germany Inside Out*, a series of five television programmes which I co-presented in 2001, and which provided the immediate spur towards writing this book.

*Easier Fatherland* is about the repression and unwrapping of memory, about denial and responsibility, and about a society in sickness and in health. This can be seen as a story of three generations. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Federal Republic of Germany was a country in almost complete denial – as an examination of the recommended schoolbooks from that time makes depressingly clear. Many who had lived in the Third Reich were eager not to confront the enormity of the crimes. That repression of truth led directly to the rebellion, a quarter-century after the war, of the 1968 generation – a rebellion more radical in West Germany than anywhere else in Europe or the United States. This radicalism, in turn, spilled into the murderous terrorism of the 1970s, culminating in an orgy of violence in autumn 1977 – all allegedly in search of a ‘better’ Germany. That, in turn, paved the way for an increasing revulsion against violence – and a new form of radicalism whose commitment to non-violence was a core element from the start. The Greens’ impact on German society – before and after they became part of the German ruling coalition in 1998 – goes well beyond the party’s limited electoral support.

The fall of the Wall in 1989, and German unification the following year, opened the way for a whole new set of problems, economic and social. The sense of wonder quickly gave way to bitter and endless recriminations. The two Germanies quickly fell out of love with each other once they were living together in a single home. It has taken 15 years, till the beginning of the twenty-first century, for that ‘wall in the heads’ to begin to be demolished.

Meanwhile, Germany’s twentieth-century history begins to be seen in the round for the first time. In the 1950s and 1960s, children were taught about how much Germans had suffered; they were taught little about German crimes. In more recent decades, that pattern was reversed: the emphasis was on German crimes, while the terrible German suffering in and after 1945, when millions of civilians were killed, was passed over in near-silence in Germany, let alone abroad. Until a few years ago, the rebellious generation of 1968, by now the new establishment, were so

focused on the crimes of their parents' generation that they were reluctant to permit any attention to be devoted to German suffering. They believed that they had heard too much of that from their parents.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many who were once eager to focus only on German crimes have acknowledged that shutting one's eyes to the nightmares suffered by ordinary Germans – 15 million driven out of their homes, of whom 2 million died; rape on a mass scale; half a million civilians killed in Allied bombing raids – is equally one-sided. German crimes led directly to the German suffering. But that, it is now widely agreed, is no reason for German suffering to be passed over in silence.

A similar opening-up can be seen on a whole range of taboo topics – including the sending abroad of German troops, which seemed unthinkable less than a decade ago. A Green foreign minister, representing an almost pacifist party, argues successfully for German troops to be sent to Kosovo and even Afghanistan. When Germany drew the line offering support for the war in Iraq in 2003, that was not because it was deemed inappropriate for German soldiers to be sent to Baghdad – but, in another unprecedented departure, it was a public German defiance of the wishes of Washington.

This book draws on the Germanies that I have known at various times in my life: in north-west Germany as a schoolchild in 1968; in Berlin as a student in the early 1970s; visiting friends, while living in neighbouring Poland, in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and as a foreign correspondent in East Germany at the end of that decade, including the privilege of witnessing the extraordinary revolutions across the region, and the magical moment of history when the people of Leipzig forced the all-powerful regime to retreat, on 9 October 1989. Between 1992 and 1995, I was Germany correspondent for *The Independent*. In 2001, I was reporter and co-presenter on the *Germany Inside Out* programmes for the BBC. Finally, I returned to Germany in 2003 and 2004 while writing this book.

One thing that these Germanies have in common is that each grapples, in its own way, with identity and with the demons of the past. A book like Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* – which argues that Germans were eager to organize a Holocaust even before Hitler arrived on the scene – shoots to the top of the German bestseller lists and stays there for months, even though most serious historians believe its arguments to be flawed. And, at the same time, fears of the neo-Nazis remain strong. Meanwhile, the idea of a multicultural Germany (*multikulti* is a new German buzzword) remains just around the corner, with the introduction of new citizenship laws. Closer than it

was a few years ago, but still elusive. Even as politicians scrabble frantically to reform the once-proud German economy, the new Germany continues to regain its political self-confidence – looking forward into the future and unflinchingly back into the past. One day (not yet, but one day) Germany may even become normal once more. This book tells the story of that confused journey towards normality.

There is no shortage of those who argue that a powerful Germany remains an intrinsically dangerous proposition, because of what happened there 60 and 70 years ago. One can also argue the opposite: that the lessons of the 1930s and 1940s have helped protect Germany against the spread of modern nationalism, even while far-right parties all across Europe have enjoyed remarkable success. In Germany, no far-right political party has succeeded in winning a single seat in the Bundestag. In terms of its stability and its commitment to democracy, today's Germany seems to be the best Germany we have ever had. That might all yet change. For the moment, however, for all the country's manifold flaws, that is, perhaps, a reason for cautious celebration for Germans and non-Germans alike.

*London, February 2004*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A word of explanation is appropriate about the judgements with which this book is littered. I started writing this book while still a journalist at *The Independent*, and completed it after going to work for Human Rights Watch. *Easier Fatherland* remains the book that I would have written – peppered with personal opinions – had I not taken up my post at HRW. I hope that my opinions are backed up with facts; they are not intended to reflect mindless prejudice. Nonetheless, these are my personal opinions, not those of Human Rights Watch.

Thanks to those with whom I have discussed the ideas in this book over the years, or who have found time to comment on earlier drafts – including Colleen Buzzard, Volker Hassemer, Theo Koll, Hucky Land, Kathy Lerman, Miriam Mahlow, Andrew Marshall, Sabine Sparwasser and Uschi Tiphine. Thanks also to executive producer David Wilson and producers Robert Cooke and Cosima Dannoritzer for my involvement in the *Germany Inside Out* programmes which helped kickstart *Easier Fatherland* – and to the BBC for permission to quote from interviews filmed for the series.

I am grateful to my colleagues, most especially to Carroll Bogert, Rory Mungoven and Kenneth Roth, for their generosity in giving me the time and space to complete the book.



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## Another Country

As a Jew, Rathenau was a German patriot; as a German patriot, he was a liberal citizen of the world.

(The German writer and historian Sebastian Haffner remembers the German foreign minister Walther Rathenau, assassinated in 1922)

It was, despite its failings, for us young Germans the best period of our lives . . . A new idealism beyond doubt and disappointment, a new liberalism broader, more comprehensive and more mature than the political liberalism of the nineteenth century.

(Haffner on the partial optimism of Weimar Germany)

Given everything that happened during twelve years in the first half of the last century, it is easy to forget that there was a before. A time when the words 'Germany' and 'mass murder' did not seem an obvious historical matching pair. A madman might dream up such a project, and even write about it, while in jail, in a book called *My Struggle*. But nobody (it seemed self-evident) would go along with such lunacy. Before 1933, the crimes of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich seemed inconceivable to Germans and non-Germans alike. After 1945, by contrast, those years have often been treated as if they were part of a natural German continuum – a lethal daisy chain stretching back into history, whose implications are still with us today.

Hitler has driven a wedge into our perceptions of everything from clothing to architecture and opera. The humble lederhosen as traditionally worn in the Bavarian mountains has come to seem associated with the Hitler Youth. A building which elsewhere would be described as

modernist becomes, in a German context, 'Third Reich', as if the building were defined not by its shape and features but by the empty space above the doorway, where a swastika may have been chiselled away after 1945. Music that predates Nazism by many years is infected by the scale of Hitler's crimes. Thus, Richard Wagner was a favourite composer of many German Jews before 1939; his unpleasant views were perceived as irrelevant to aesthetic judgements. The Zionist Congress chose the *Tannhäuser* overture for its opening ceremony in 1898. Theodor Herzl, father of Zionism, was an enthusiast. Herzl said that, while he was working on *The Jewish State*, 'My sole recreation in the evening consisted in listening to Wagner's music, especially *Tannhäuser*, an opera which I went to hear as often as it was performed.' At the state funeral in 1922 of Germany's Jewish foreign minister, Walther Rathenau, the Siegfried funeral march from *Götterdämmerung* was performed. The orchestra which became the Israel Philharmonic performed Wagner at one of its inaugural concerts in 1936. Now, such choices all seem unthinkable. In the twenty-first century, a performance of Wagner's *Liebestod* (under Daniel Barenboim's provocative baton in Jerusalem in 2001) is still capable of triggering protests, because his music was beloved by Hitler. The Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, meanwhile, has been blamed for what Simon Schama describes in *Landscape and Memory* as 'the unacceptable historical consequences', a century after the painter's death, of the heroic and mythic tradition within which he worked. In the words of the waspish German author Florian Illies (exaggerating, but only a little): 'Anybody who still said that they liked Caspar David Friedrich stood accused for decades of not being sufficiently critical with regard to German history.'

It is sometimes difficult for us to look back at Germany before 1933 except through the murderous prism of Auschwitz, Sobibor and Treblinka – as if the extermination camps were the obvious culmination of everything that came before. When an extraneous piece of evidence is inappropriately blurted out in court, juries may seek in vain to obey the exhortation to 'put out of your minds what you have just heard'. Similarly, the rise and fall of the Third Reich so dominates our perceptions of modern Germany that it is difficult to remind ourselves that the pre-1933 past was another country; they did things differently there.

One bestselling work of recent years argues that the Holocaust was a natural extension of the murderous tendencies inherent in German society before 1933. Certainly, anti-Semitism was widespread in Germany long before Hitler came to power. In that, Germany was not

alone. When Alfred Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island after a false conviction for treason, a German-Jewish student was so alarmed by the anti-Semitic climate – with crowds outside the Paris courtroom chanting 'Death to the Jews!' – that he wrote home to say that he would try to move back from the Sorbonne to 'a decent German university'. The German Jewish politician Eduard Lasker was shocked, when visiting the United States, to discover that Jews were banned from some hotels. He concluded that, in terms of integration, the United States lagged behind his own country. In Britain, anti-Semitism had supporters in high places; admirers of the British fascist leader, Sir Oswald Mosley ('The big Jew controls the parties, and the little Jew sweats you in the sweatshop'), included at least one leading newspaper tycoon. In Russia, the creation of the Pale of Settlement, prohibiting Jews from residing in the Russian heartland, forced Jews to live literally beyond the pale. In much of eastern Europe, anti-Semitic violence was routine. Russia and Ukraine gave the word *pogrom* – derived from the word for a clap of thunder – to the world, to describe the lethal attacks that became commonplace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Poland introduced ghetto benches in universities in the 1930s and banned Jewish entry to the medical and legal professions.

In Germany, despite the eliminationism identified by Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, things looked almost rosy by contrast. Because of the misery of tsarist rule, Jews in parts of eastern Europe treated advancing German troops in 1914 as if they were liberators. As Amos Elon points out in his portrait of Jews in Germany, *The Pity of It All*: 'In a sense, they were.' Boris Pasternak makes a similar point, through Yuri, the hero of *Doctor Zhivago*. Yuri contrasts the treatment of Jews in Russia during the First World War and their privileged situation in Germany, where Pasternak had studied philosophy before 1914. 'You can't imagine what the wretched Jewish population [in Russia] is going through in this war,' Pasternak's Zhivago tells a friend. 'Why should they be patriotic when the [German] enemy offers them equal rights and we do nothing but persecute them?'

More than in any other European country, Jews in early twentieth-century Germany were part of the national warp and weave. One of the country's best-loved poets, Heinrich Heine, was Jewish. (The Nazis would later be obliged to label his poems as 'author unknown', since it was difficult to keep his poems out of the anthologies completely.) The composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was the grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, was 'the German Socrates'. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century Germany, Jews faced huge restrictions; gradually, however, those restrictions were whittled down and civic equality was achieved.

Before 1933, Jews were prominent in Germany in arts, commerce, science and politics. The country's best-known theatre director, Max Reinhardt, was Jewish; so was the president of the Prussian art academy, Max Liebermann. So, too, was Germany's most distinguished scientist, Albert Einstein – a media star in his own right, who liked to stick his tongue out at what he called the *Lichtaffen* – 'flashbulb monkeys', the fledgling paparazzi who pursued him endlessly.

Goldhagen argues that the eliminationist mindset was a 'constant' in Germany before Hitler. German Jews at that time, despite their often-expressed concerns about widespread anti-Semitism, rarely saw things in such stark terms. Instead, they contrasted the relative tolerance of Germany with the dangers of anti-Semitism elsewhere. The journalist and novelist Joseph Roth, writing in 1920, describes the misery of Jews recently arrived in Berlin: 'Fear of pogroms has welded them together like a landslip of unhappiness and grime that, slowly gathering volume, has come rolling across Germany from the east.' For Roth and others, organized violence against Jews was something that happened to others; in Germany, it was (for the moment) unfamiliar.

Retrospective judgements make many things look different. A famous couplet about Germany, much quoted by Germans and non-Germans alike, comes from the Heine poem *Night Thoughts*, written in 1843:

*Denk ich an Deutschland in der Nacht,  
Dann bin ich um den Schlaf gebracht.*

If I think of Germany at night,  
Then I am no longer able to sleep.

A post-Auschwitz world has little difficulty in appreciating those sentiments, which even in the twenty-first century are sometimes treated as if they represent an eternal verity. Thus, during protests in 2001 against a government proposal to send troops to Afghanistan, Heine's doom-laden quotation was plastered on walls and lamp-posts all over Berlin, as if Heine were warning from the grave about the dangers of German militarism. The original context of the poem is different. *Night Thoughts* is a wistful poem of longing for Heine's German homeland, written from his Parisian political exile. Heine was the supreme ironist. He was serious, however, in insisting that his patriotism was more real than that of his reactionary critics could ever be. In his *Germany: a Winter's Tale*, Heine

scorns his attackers, telling them: 'Calm yourselves: I love the fatherland as much as you do. Because of this love I have lived for 13 years in exile.' Heine was not alone in that view. The satirical writer Kurt Tucholsky ('a Jew without religion', in his own words) described himself in the 1920s in Heinian terms: 'We have a right to hate Germany, because we love it.'

At this time, Jewishness and Germanness did not seem implacable alternatives, but two sides of the same central European coin. The historian Sebastian Haffner, writing in 1939 about Walther Rathenau, argued that the foreign minister's Jewishness and German patriotism were complementary: 'As a Jew, Rathenau was a German patriot; as a German patriot, he was a liberal citizen of the world; as a liberal citizen of the world he was a strict servant of the law.' Rathenau's assassination by far-right extremists in 1922 was accompanied by abuse against 'the Jewish pig'. The most important focus of his murderers' indignation was, however, not his Jewishness (a useful additional target), but his role in signing the Treaty of Rapallo with the Soviet Union. (Matthias Erzberger, a Catholic politician who signed the November armistice, had been assassinated the previous year.) The response to Rathenau's death was overwhelming. Workers went on strike as a token of mourning and protest. The funeral was held in the parliamentary chamber of the Reichstag, which was transformed into a sea of flowers. A contemporary observer wrote: 'The effect was overwhelming. Many of those around me wept.'

Mistrust of Germany and of German power was widespread, long before Hitler. The poet Georg Herwegh wrote, in connection with Bismarck's unification of Germany in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian war: 'You have in fame-crowned murder become the leading nation in the world. Germany, I shudder at you.' The union of 25 states and kingdoms into a single country had potentially disturbing implications for the entire continent. Many Germans were themselves suspicious of Prussian militarism. In Bavaria, there was resentment of the Bismarckian order, with its Prussification and 'rule by sabre'. 'Prussian obedience' – a phrase which would take on a lethal, emblematic quality in the context of the Nazi era – was widely recognized as real. Carl Zuckmayer's comedy *The Captain of Köpenick* is based on the true story of how Wilhelm Voigt, a shoe-maker, who dressed up in an officer's uniform bought from a second-hand shop. Armed with nothing but a belief in Prussian obedience, he ordered soldiers to follow him to the town hall – where he arrested the mayor and took charge of the treasury. Awed by the power of the uniform, nobody felt able to disobey. Zuckmayer's play was hugely successful when it opened in 1931; unsurprisingly, it was

closed down when Hitler came to power. In the words of the writer John Mortimer, the play's English translator: 'History, impatient with all gentle jokes, seized *The Captain of Köpenick* by the scruff of the neck and made it, in spite of itself, a dangerous satire.'

In short: anti-Semitism, yes; Prussian militarism and obedience, yes. It takes quite a leap, however, to get from there to the conclusion that the Nazi killing machine merely dotted the i's and crossed the t's of a peculiarly German tradition of murderous prejudice. It has often been said that Germany's historical *Sonderweg* – 'special path', which left Germany out of step with the rest of western Europe, in the process of state-building and the creation of national consciousness – helped pave the way for the Third Reich. Germany was 'a belated nation', in the words of a book first published in 1935. In retrospect, the *Sonderweg* may help us to understand how the nightmare developed. Before 1933, however, there was nothing self-evident about what was to come, even for the greatest pessimist. Until the nightmare was already under way, the extent of the crimes that Germans would willingly commit or avert their eyes from seemed literally unthinkable.

Despite the instability after the end of the First World War in 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles the following year, fascism hardly seemed preordained. On the contrary. Germany's Social Democrats had the largest membership of any political party in the world. The naval mutiny in the northern port of Kiel in 1918 triggered a string of further rebellions across the country, and quickly led to the abdication of the Kaiser and the collapse of imperial rule. It seemed briefly as though the Communist revolution that had swept Russia a year earlier might repeat itself in Germany, too. The new republican government seemed to bespeak a new Germany. Three regional prime ministers were Jewish. The old Reich collapsed with none of the bloody horror of the Bolshevik Revolution the previous year. Einstein was starry-eyed: 'None of us felt cold or hunger: was this not the dawn of a new era that had inscribed "Never Again War" on its banner? And had not this powerful, wonderful breakthrough started right here in Berlin?'

In Bavaria, a group of idealistic intellectuals seized power. Lenin's dictum that 'revolution could never grip Berlin – Germans would only storm a railway platform after first queuing for platform tickets' appeared partly disproved. In Berlin, the Spartacist rebels seized key public buildings before their uprising was crushed; two of the movement's leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were murdered. All in all, it was a difficult birth for the new Weimar republic – so named because it was in the city of Goethe that Germany's first

democratic constitution was drawn up in 1919. (Berlin was considered too unsafe.) The elected assembly convened in the cosy setting of the town's court theatre, with circumstance but little pomp. According to one contemporary observer, the atmosphere had 'not a trace of the greatness appropriate to this historic moment'.

The turbulence of the early months of the Weimar republic did not subside. There was widespread bitterness at the harsh terms of the Versailles treaty. Within the next few years came the legendary collapse of the currency – a catastrophe which ensures that, at the beginning of another century, the word 'Weimar' remains a familiar shorthand for describing an economic disaster zone and the political instability that accompanies hyperinflation. In 1921, there were 80 marks to the dollar; within two years, that had risen to 350,000 marks to the dollar. That was just the prelude. Through the summer and autumn of 1923, the currency plunged vertically – four million to the dollar in August, 99 million in September, 25 billion in October. Banknotes with a face value of millions of marks were less valuable than toilet paper. The mark finally reached its ultimate nadir, when it touched the meaningless exchange rate of four trillion to the dollar on 15 November 1923. Sebastian Haffner, writing from the perspective of 1939, emphasizes the unique quality of Germany's dangerous drama at this time:

That extraordinary year is probably what has marked today's Germans with those characteristics that are so strange and incomprehensible in the eyes of the world, and so different from what used to be thought of as the German character. In that year, an entire generation of Germans had a spiritual organ removed . . . All nations went through the Great War, and most of them have also experienced revolutions, social crises, strikes, redistribution of wealth and currency devaluation. None but Germany has undergone the fantastic, grotesque extreme of all these together; none has experienced the gigantic, carnival dance of death, the unending, bloody Saturnalia, in which not only money but all standards lost their value. The year 1923 prepared Germany, not specifically for Nazism, but for any fantastic adventure.

Thomas Mann, too, saw a connection between the insanity of Weimar inflation and the later insanity of the Third Reich:

Just as the Germans saw their monetary units swell to millions, billions, and trillions and then burst, they later saw their nation



swell to the Reich of all Germans, to *Lebensraum*, to European order, to world dominion, and will also still see it burst. The market woman who in a dull tone asked a 'hundred billion' for an egg had at the time forgotten how to be amazed . . . Germans forgot to rely on themselves as individuals and learned to expect everything from 'politics', from the 'state', from 'destiny' . . . Robbed of everything, the Germans became a nation of robbers.

When currency reform – including the creation of a new currency in November 1923 – helped bring economic stability, many Germans saw it as a miracle. One Berliner, returning from abroad, summed up the change: 'People had their brass doorknobs out again – whereas in 1923 you couldn't find a brass doorknob in all Berlin: people would just steal it in the night.' The next few years were a time of almost-optimism. Haffner moves into lyrical vein, looking back on that time as a window of hope:

It was, despite its failings, for us young Germans the best period of our lives. All that we have experienced of the sweetness of life is associated with it . . . A new idealism beyond doubt and disappointment, a new liberalism broader, more comprehensive and more mature than the political liberalism of the nineteenth century.

In Weimar-era Berlin, the sense that 'anything goes' was strong. One foreign visitor complained: 'Berlin finds its outlet in the wildest dissipation imaginable. The German . . . enjoys obscenity in a form which even the Parisian would not tolerate.' Marlene Dietrich became famous as Lola Lola, the cabaret singer in Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. In Paris, the film was banned; in Berlin, it raised hardly an eyebrow. 'Wild dissipation' or not, this was a period of enormous creativity, with films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the twelve-tone music of Arnold Schönberg, the dramas and musicals of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, the savagely satirical paintings of George Grosz. The Bauhaus movement, based in Weimar and then Dessau, opened up a revolutionary new world of architecture and design, led by a host of stars including Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. In Germany, a hundred artistic flowers bloomed.

Then, in 1929, came the Great Crash. In the chaos that followed, those flowers were soon trampled underfoot. Even then, the long-term dangers were not immediately obvious. The Nazis' representation in the