

Leeds-Swansea Colloquia on
Contemporary German Literature

Re-forming the Nation in
Literature and Film /
Entwürfe zur Nation in
Literatur und Film

The Patriotic Idea in Contemporary
German-Language Culture /
Die patriotische Idee in der
deutschsprachigen Kultur der Gegenwart

Julian Preece (ed.)

Peter Lang

Introduction: Uncertain Nations at the Heart of Europe

According to a self-proclaimed left-wing book about German patriotism by the Green Party politician Robert Habeck there have been two moments of national euphoria in Germany in the recent past. The first was prompted by reunification in 1989–90 and the second by hosting the World Cup in 2006. The problem for Habeck is that both moments were inconclusive. Reunification was sudden, unexpected and unplanned and entailed a mere joining up of territories: ‘vereinigt wurden Länder, nicht Ideen [...] Eine Nation im Aufbruch konnte so nicht entstehen’. At the World Cup sixteen years later two generations of Germans who had been brought up to mistrust national symbols at best discovered that they enjoyed waving the Federal Republic’s black, red and gold flag when cheering on their football team (which they had always done). For Habeck, however, this was no more than ‘spielerischer Patriotismus’ because ‘Ihm fehlte jeder ernste Anspruch.’¹ In other words, there is some work still to be done when it comes to thinking through what it means to be a citizen of Germany in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Habeck’s book is one of a number of publications on the subject which have appeared in the past five years. His own not entirely original recommendation is that German national allegiance and sovereign functions be transferred to the supranational European Union, albeit only once the EU has been reformed and gained greater democratic legitimacy. There have been interventions in other media, such as the collaborative film *Deutschland 09. 13 Kurze Filme zur Lage der Nation* (2009, dir. various), a remake of New German Cinema’s seminal *Deutschland*

1 Robert Habeck, *Patriotismus. Ein linkes Plädoyer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), pp. 30–1.

im Herbst (1978, dir. various), as well as much fiction and travel writing, which are the focus of interest for most contributions to this volume. As European nations in the nineteenth century (the era of nation building) came to exist first in poems, songs and plays, making them first of all the creations of poets, lyricists and playwrights, this volume assesses how contemporary German-language writers and filmmakers have approached the troubled question of the nation over the last decade. Before summarising some of our findings, I will enumerate some further reference points with the aim of anchoring the discussions of the literary and cinematic works which follow in German political history of the last twenty years.

Since the end of the Cold War, Germany and Austria have been once again independent, sovereign states, finally free of control by the victors of World War II. Reunified Germany became at a stroke the largest and richest country in the European Union, and thus de facto the most powerful. As it has weathered the financial crisis since 2008 with greater resilience than its partners and neighbours, in particular France, Germany has recently emerged as the EU's undisputed yet reluctant and often resented leader. This is the subject of a thought-provoking analysis by the country's leading sociologist, Ulrich Beck. *Das deutsche Europa* takes its title from Thomas Mann, who argued in 1953 for a 'European Germany', meaning one that shared both a destiny and a set of core Enlightenment values with other European states, instead of a 'German Europe' that Hitler had waged a war of extermination to achieve. Today Mann's binary opposition has dissolved to give us what nobody in the aftermath of World War II thought possible: a 'European Germany in a German Europe'.² As the question has changed, new answers are needed. Beck's conclusion is that this is happening by default rather than by design because European leaders, whether in Berlin, Paris or elsewhere, are concerned with their own national priorities rather than those of the Union as a whole. Like Habeck, he argues from the left for a strengthened and above all fully legitimised EU.

2 Ulrich Beck, *Das deutsche Europa. Neue Machtlandschaften im Zeichen der Krise* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2012), pp. 7–8.

There is a nationalist dimension to the economic process which has resulted in German hegemony: during the great boom which began in the early 1990s (and which was the longest such boom in modern economic history) Germany largely stuck to its own version of corporate, socially responsible 'Rhenish' capitalism. Gerhard Schröder's 'Agenda 2010' reforms, which cut welfare payments to the long-term unemployed and made it easier for firms to hire and fire workers, may have split his Social Democratic Party in 2003 but they were mild by the standards of the Anglo-Saxon states. 'Agenda 2010' was, however, as far as the German people were prepared to go in the direction of neo-Liberalism. They resisted calls to embrace free-market practices championed by the British and Americans, regarding them not only as unjust but as essentially alien. Whether the EU as a whole and the countries at its core which have adopted the single currency can prosper by following German fiscal policies, as Berlin is at present insisting, remains at the time of writing anything but clear, however. What is beyond doubt is that both the EU and Germany are at a crossroads.

German voters' preference for sound money is founded in folk memories of the 1923 Inflation and the economic collapse at the end of World War II. These are not rational grounds for policy making but manifestations of the past's continued hold on the present. In both 1948 and 1990, currency reform (the introduction of the D-Mark) or currency union (the merger of the West and East currencies) took precedence over the political settlement and the foundation of states (the Federal Republic in 1949 or reunification in October 1990). In foreign policy, the mistakes of the past loom even larger. The German public's refusal to countenance participation in military interventions has resulted in greater hesitancy when it comes to international leadership. President Horst Köhler resigned in 2010 after his remark that the *Bundeswehr* through its presence in Afghanistan was ultimately helping to defend trade routes was taken to mean that Western capital had declared war on the rest of the world and that Köhler was prosecuting that war on Germany's behalf. The population may not be quite pacifist in its attitudes but the majority does not want to see its soldiers in action in foreign countries under any circumstances. It took the German government some time to understand this. After Helmut Kohl pushed for the EU to recognise Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, both former provinces

of Austria-Hungary, and thus provoked Serbian aggression, Schröder's Red-Green Coalition supported NATO action against Serbia in Kosovo in 1999. In 2002, however, Red-Green owed its re-election to a decidedly nationalist refusal to join the American-led invasion of Iraq, which went ahead without German (or French) participation the following spring. The voters had let their views be known. It is no accident that three chapters in this volume are devoted to German and Austrian responses to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavian Wars in the mid-1990s not only saw atrocities committed on European soil for the first time since 1945 and precipitated an influx of refugees into Germany and Austria, they were a mirror in which Germans and Austrians looked at themselves and their own recent history. Schröder's foreign minister Joschka Fischer argued that the Serb massacres at places like Srebrenica made it morally incumbent on Germany to respond with force because the far greater atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust were committed in Germany's name: 'Nie wieder Auschwitz!' One point of continuity was alarming. What disturbed Peter Handke was that when battle lines were drawn up, whether on the ground or in the media, they were similar to those of 1914 or 1939. This prompted him to wonder if the Serbs had resisted first Austro-Hungarian, then Nazi aggression in two world wars, was it legitimate to blame them now?

Debates about identity in both countries continue to revolve around the presence of sizeable Muslim minorities: up to four million in Germany, three million of whom, whether with or without German citizenship, with Turkish roots. The successful German football team may include players from a variety of backgrounds, but in society at large there are unresolved tensions. The leader of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Mohamed Atta, lived for many years in Hamburg where he studied, went to football matches, and appeared happily integrated. In 2010 Thilo Sarrazin, up to then a distinguished Berlin-based Social Democrat, became notorious for publishing a 400-page anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim tract, which despite a retail price in excess of twenty euros quickly became the best-selling book of the entire post-war era.³ The popularity of his inflammatory

3 Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2010).

assessment of alleged welfare dependency among German residents with a 'Migrationshintergrund' showed that voters lagged behind their political leaders on this key issue. Sarrazin may not be a profound thinker but the scandal surrounding his book provoked Zafer Şenocak, a leading Turkish-German writer, to produce a minor masterpiece of cultural criticism combining analysis with autobiography to account for German insecurities.⁴ Like his Iranian-German contemporary Navid Kermani in an equally conciliatory pamphlet,⁵ Şenocak illuminates the clash from both sides and returns to the Enlightenment in order to trace the origins of a phenomenon he calls the German 'Unbehagen mit der Moderne'. He recognises that Germans after 1945 were profoundly damaged by their war-time experiences and unable for that reason either to relate to the 'foreigners' in their midst or to provide them with a society and culture into which they could readily integrate:

Ein manisch-depressives wie emsiges Volk, das auch sechs Jahrzehnte nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges, zwei Jahrzehnte nach der Wiedervereinigung, keineswegs mit sich selbst im Reinen ist. Die Deutschen werden nervös, wenn sie sich mit anderen beschäftigen müssen, denn sie brauchen die ganze Energie für sich selbst.⁶

This is also a key insight in several of the chapters in this volume. Kermani's polemic is inspired by Lessing's lesser known play on the subject of overweening love for one's country, *Philotas*. His argument is that among writers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century true German patriots opposed 'Deutschland' and that this honourable tradition should be continued in the twenty-first century. Kermani's motivation for publication was not an ignorant book, but the revelations of the racist 'Kebab Murders' committed by the self-styled 'National Socialist Underground'. What he found truly shocking was not that three extremists from good families should commit ten murders over as many years (killing eight Turks, one Greek, and one policewoman), but that despite overwhelming evidence the police did not recognise the murders as racially motivated. In other words, they could not see what they did not want to believe was there.

4 Zafer Şenocak, *Deutsche Ängste. Eine Aufklärungsschrift* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2011).

5 Navid Kermani, *Vergesst Deutschland! Eine patriotische Rede* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2012).

6 Şenocak, p. 114.

The authors of these essays are highly trained in critical seeing and reflection – more capable of overcoming their own prejudices, one hopes, than the officers of the *Bundeskriminalamt*. The essays were not commissioned. Their authors, who teach and research contemporary German literature and film in Germany, the USA, India, Croatia, Australia, as well as the UK, responded to the published theme of the Colloquium which took place at Swansea University from 16 to 18 July 2012. The volume thus offers a snapshot of current interests – mainly among younger and aspiring members of the profession – and does not pretend to be comprehensive. On the first evening of the Colloquium, the Romanian-German Nobel Laureate Herta Müller, who was in Swansea to receive an honorary award from the university, gave a reading, followed by a wide-ranging discussion with a large audience. On the second evening, I screened Kevin Allen's classic film about Wales set in Swansea, *Twin Town*. Produced by Danny Boyle in 1997, the same year that saw a commitment from a new government in Westminster to a referendum on the devolution of political powers, *Twin Town* adapted its title from Dylan Thomas's famous line that the city of his birth was 'an ugly, lovely town'. The film bears comparison with Boyle's pre-Devolution Scottish epic of collective defeat and self-loathing, *Trainspotting* (1994). Much has changed in Wales since 1997. After the establishment of a Welsh Assembly in 1999, public bodies concerned with culture and history have invested in nation-constructing narratives with the aim of fostering a national sense of place and the past. Two weeks after our Colloquium was over, Boyle reached even bigger audiences with the opening ceremony for the London Olympics, which took the form of an emphatically inclusive and forward-looking narrative of British history. As 'Auslandsgermanisten' one of our roles is to suggest approaches and topics from unique standpoints. For the Swansea Colloquium of 2012 and this resulting volume, that standpoint is one of Welsh, Scottish and British self-reinvention.

Among the further reasons for the theme was a conclusion that I reached while writing *Baader-Meinhof and the Novel* (2012) that cultural products which dealt with the recent past of extremist left-wing violence often brought the two unequal halves of Germany, East and West, together. The topic of Baader-Meinhof terrorism could do that essentially for two reasons.

The first was that the German Democratic Republic was involved in the history in various ways, in particular, by secretly offering asylum and new identities to terrorist 'Aussteiger' in the 1980s. The second was that it gave the former West Germany a similarly reprehensible left-wing past to the former East because on both sides there had been misguided idealists who had done wrong in the name of good. What interested me was the way that these shared narratives, which are unlikely to have occurred to many people at the time, were fashioned retrospectively from this subject.⁷ Gerhard Jens Lüdeker in his chapter on recent made-for-television blockbusters about GDR history makes a similar point, except that the costume dramas he discusses, taking their cue from *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006, dir. Florian von Donnersmarck), are driven by Western triumphalism. Most of the other books and films that are examined in this volume are less ideologically assured. One central question which is indirectly posed in most chapters, but never directly answered, is whether the collective entity known as Germany should more properly be conflated with the Federal Republic, with its successful 65-year history ('the best Germany we have ever had'), rather than the 'nation' with all its tainted connotations and corrupted concepts such as 'Vaterland'. That contemporary Germany is a product not only of its history up to 1945 but also of the process of understanding that history and acting upon that understanding since 1945 is one conclusion that a reader of these essays must reach.

The volume begins with three chapters on recent travel writing devoted either to journeys around Germany or to individual regions of the country. There is an appetite among the German reading public for these travelogues, several of which have become bestsellers. Christopher Meid shows how one of the most successful of these by Wolfgang Büscher stakes out the territory, characterising it as shaped irrevocably by the violence of World War II. Moritz von Uslar, a generation younger than Büscher and less encumbered by memories of the past, sets off in search of the wilds of the former East Germany, finding them on Berlin's doorstep in a provincial Brandenburg town.

7 Julian Preece, *Baader–Meinhof and the Novel: Narratives of the Nation / Fantasies of the Revolution, 1970–2010* (New York: Basingstoke, 2012).

However enamoured von Uslar becomes of the people he encounters here, he reports back to his metropolitan readers in the style of an anthropologist visiting an alien but friendly tribe. In the two decades following reunification provincial Brandenburg became a byword for brutish behaviour and unenlightened politics, but when it comes to views about Germany, Greg Bond argues in his discussion of *Deutschboden. Eine teilnehmende Beobachtung*, that the natives are portrayed as relaxed and in their distinctive way no less progressive than their compatriots in the capital. In the third chapter Aniela Knoblich shows that this body of domestic travel writing is overwhelmingly by men and is underpinned by some traditional masculine assumptions, not to say sexist attitudes, of which, she argues, von Uslar is a prime exponent. She notes too that with few exceptions, these travellers originate from the former West Germany. Knoblich cannot account for the Western male bias, but the result is that the victors in the Cold War are writing the history and attempting to control the narrative. The new Germany they evoke is a construct of the old West. The next chapter by Christian Sieg on Judith Schalansky's much praised novel *Der Hals der Giraffe* (2011) is on the subject of the decline of the old East, which Schalansky addresses in complex narrative ways which are inspired by recent American theories of evolutionary biology. While Schalansky (b.1980 in the old GDR) is not a Western male writer, once again the GDR is the object of (pseudo-)scientific enquiry. Her novel shows that these various paradigms are inadequate and ideologically biased and that their proponents tend to see what they want to see rather than working from the evidence.

The next three chapters are all case studies of individual novels by three leading writers, the old Sixty-Eighter F.C. Delius (*Mein Jahr als Mörder*, 2004), the GDR-born Reinhard Jirgl (*Die Stille*, 2009), and the Swiss provocateur Christian Kracht (*Imperium*, 2012). If we take their trio of novels as narratives of the nation, then the overall picture that emerges is contradictory. As Miriam Runge demonstrates, Delius is an optimist. The shadow that was still cast by the Nazi past in 1968, when the main part of *Mein Jahr als Mörder* is set, has all but disappeared. The Sixty-Eighters have made their peace with the establishment, whose ranks many of them have long since joined. In contrast, according to Carmen Ulrich's interpretation of Jirgl's *Die Stille*, the past still very much informs the present in

this intergenerational family novel. My own account of *Imperium*, which is the only chapter not originally given as a paper at the Colloquium, argues that Kracht re-invents some basic narrative patterns found in the fictions of Thomas Mann to fashion a mock allegory of a Germany which has been redeemed from the grotesque transgressions of Nazism.

The next three chapters are on film and television and their authors' conclusions give arguably greater pause for thought. Mathias Uecker uses audience statistics to show that the much vaunted revival of German cinema in the 2000s is something of a chimera when it comes to success abroad. Foreign audiences know the Germany that they like to see portrayed on screen: their favourite films are set either in the Third Reich (*Der Untergang*, *Sophie Scholl*) or the GDR (*Good Bye Lenin!*, *Das Leben der Anderen*). One film that enjoyed great success in Germany is the comedy about German-Turkish identity *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* (dir. Yasemin Samdereli, 2011), which British distributors have sadly ruled to be 'too German' for release in the UK, but which attracted bigger audiences in Germany than any previous Turkish-German film.⁸ As an intervention in the post-Sarrafin debates, *Almanya* reaches out a hand of friendship to the host country. Three other films set in Berlin about inter-ethnic mixing or the lack of it (Züli Aladag's *Wut*, 2006; Agostino Imondi and Dietmar Ratsch's *Neukölln Unlimited*, 2010; and Bettina Blümer's *Prinzessinnenbad*, 2006) show how the original 'German' inhabitants are less secure in their own identity. Alexandra Ludewig echoes Zafer Şenocak in her findings that reveal that reverse racism can be one consequence of this insecurity and that film is where this dynamic is being articulated. Gerhard Jens Lüdeker identifies what amounts to (Western) nationalist populism in a series of big budget made-for-TV costume dramas set in the recent past. While an intellectual, avant-garde novelist like Reinhard Jirgl makes the past unpalatable, mass-market films take the opposite approach by making (at least) Western audiences feel good. The next two chapters strike a different tone. According to Sven Hanuschek, Andreas Maier writes *Heimat* novels with a difference, thus undermining a genre so thoroughly corrupted by

8 According to Daniela Berghahn at the German Screen Studies Network, King's College London, 5 July 2013.

the Nazis and demonstrating a suspicion of 'interesting' subjects such as national collectives. The professional theatre critic Thomas Irmer traces the career of the film, theatre and installation director (as well as founder of a political party) Christoph Schlingensief, arguing that his progress from marginalised iconoclastic spirit in the early 1990s to 'state artist' by the time of his recent death is more an indication that the state itself evolved than he did. There follow a trio of chapters on novels written in German about the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s. Readers may be surprised to find this subject broached in a volume about attitudes to the nation in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Understanding these unequal conflicts between Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks (or Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, as they are more likely to label themselves) impels their northern neighbours to examine their own sense of themselves. Maria Mayr explores three of these novels to show how they depict German, Austrian and finally European failure to respond adequately to the reversion to ethnic warfare on the EU's southern border. Each time the national or supranational collective could only see these wars through their own recent past. In essence, Mayr takes us back to Šenocak's point about robust self-understanding as a precondition for engagement with what she, echoing Emmanuel Lévinas, terms the Yugoslavian 'Other'. Jakob Heller shows how Peter Handke, who repeatedly found himself pilloried for his pro-Serbian statements, is more reflective and self-critical in his recent novel *Die moravische Nacht* (2008). Angelika Welebil, who teaches in Croatia, rounds off this triptych by highlighting the didactic qualities of Oliver Bottini's Balkan *krimi*, *Der kalte Traum* (2012), which through a fictitious biography shows that national or ethnic identities are themselves ideological fictions. The volume is concluded with the sole chapter which deals with Switzerland but which is the second on Christian Kracht. While in *Imperium* Kracht gently mocks German national myths, in *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten*, according to Julia Schöll in her historical reading of the novel, he shows how a central Swiss national myth is a fictitious construct.

Each of the sixteen essays collected here illuminates a different segment of a bigger picture, whose shape and shades are themselves evolving. Presented as a whole their purpose is to provoke further discussion among students of the contemporary German-speaking scene.