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The Emergence of Modern Higher Education: The German University and Its Influence

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I. Introduction

The main significance of the *German* university lay in its pioneering an emphasis on the search for new knowledge rather than the transmission, from older to younger generations, of relatively static professional canons. Teaching staff came increasingly to be recruited from scholars and scientists who had researched, discovered and made public new interpretations and were expected to continue to do so as a part of their official duties. Mere *Gelehrsamkeit* (learnedness) or even *Applaus* (popularity with students), both increasingly prized in the 18th Century, no longer sufficed in the view of educational reformers at the beginning of the 19th Century. From then onward, under the supervision of a reinvigorated civil service and in collusion with the more innovative members of the professoriate, reformers rallied behind a demand for more *Wissenschaft* (even though, then as now, a precise definition of the term remained elusive). This meant not only the traditional role of the professor – to absorb and pass on canonical *Wissen* (knowledge) -- but the new one of contributing systematically and dynamically to its expansion through original investigation. Students (it was hoped) would learn these new methods and apply them as well. Knowledge would thereby not only be *tradiert* (handed down) in a stagnant canonical form but expanded and improved. The student would be equipped for a lifetime of openness to investigation and the application of the latest scholarly and scientific methods. The student would therefore in principle develop habits promoting lifelong moral and intellectual growth – with the goal of achieving *Bildung*.

While the specifics of a kind of ideology of *Wissenschaft* did not necessarily transfer easily to national educational systems outside the German-speaking territories of Central Europe (and not even in equal measure to all institutions there), the multiplying triumphs of “German” scholarship and science over the 19th Century stirred interest abroad in adapting elements of the reformed German universities. By the end of the century universities in Britain, the USA, much of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, Japan and even, to a lesser degree, France and Russia had taken up and grafted onto their own system some features of the German one. The addition of post-bachelor’s degrees and “graduate schools” in America is one such adaptation. Another less obvious one came from transplanted habits of thought and practice. For example, half of Stanford University's founding professors (1891) had studied in Germany, and its official motto

(*Die Luft der Freiheit weht* -- “the wind of freedom blows”) derives from the *Invectives* of German Renaissance humanist Ulrich von Hutten.

One must also note here the development of polytechnical schools into the nominal equals of universities by 1900. They also influenced developments abroad, although in a more diffuse and varied way than the university “model.” The German path perpetuated a separation of tertiary educational institutions into “pure” and “applied” *Wissenschaft*, with the latter struggling for recognition as equals to the former during the second half of the 19th Century. By contrast, other countries either assigned a higher status to their technical and specialty schools (as in France) or integrated many of their functions into existing universities (as in the United States). The reformed German universities of the 19th Century thus shifted the roles of tertiary educational institutions and the scientific and learned academies founded as far back as the 17th Century. In what might be termed the “French” or Napoleonic reform variant, also continued into the 20th Century by the USSR and other countries, the role of promoting science and discovery remained largely assigned to “academies” (of science, but also of literature, etc.). The preparation of traditional learned professional elites, however, remained the province of “colleges” or “faculties.” This hegemony began to crumble around 1900 on yet another front. Not only did polytechnical schools in Germany achieve equal status with universities and contribute theoretical breakthroughs themselves. Ever-increasing financial difficulties inherent in demanding universities to provide both new research discoveries and the training of ever-larger masses of professional cadres resulted in the creation of a growing set of pure research institutes before World War I (now known as the Max Planck Society’s various Institutes). These decoupled almost completely the functions of teaching and research, and initially the latter involved advanced theoretical approaches to problems with practical applications of interest to industry, the military and other stakeholders.

Despite losing their dominance as research centers, though, German universities continued to serve as success models to justify comparable concentrations of resources and researchers in higher educational institutions. The challenges posed to them during the 20th Century were severe: decimations of student bodies and even teaching staffs by two world wars; financial starvation during much of the time between those wars and after the second as well; and the catastrophic intervention of ideological regimes hostile to many of the very principles of free *Wissenschaft*, whether in teaching or research. What finally emerged as a national “system” of tertiary educational and research institutions by the end of the 20th Century bears many of the marks of a restoration of the successful operating principles of the past, but it clearly has lost the kind of international emulation still common through the first third of the 20th Century.

The postwar and post-reunification restructurings (or in the view of some critics, “restoration”) of the German university might be seen as a renewed resort to what supposedly worked in previous eras of crisis – the “Humboldt model” combining the roles of teaching and research in universities. (As we shall explore later, the reality or mythicity of that “model” has been a point of recent debate.) Whatever the precise contours of that model were, its central principle was hatched in the midst of a crisis of

morbidity in the 18th-Century university “system” (not only German but pan-European). The swift “creative destruction” of the Holy Roman Empire by Napoleon in the first years of the 19th Century fertilized further development of (often incommensurable) plans to save or transform what was salvageable from the rubble of institutions regarded by many contemporaries as mere relics of a benighted and corrupt Old Regime.

II. The crisis of the traditional university in the 18th Century: how the reformed German system saved the traditional shell of the moribund medieval “university” form by 1810

There was no “Germany” before the 19th Century. True, German was becoming a literary language, slowly replacing Latin for instruction in universities, but some “German” kings (one thinks of Frederick II. of Prussia, ruling 1740-86) preferred to write and speak French at their courts. The Habsburg emperor in Vienna, the elected head of the mostly Germanophone Holy Roman Empire, ruled in addition multilingual Central European territories stretching to Russia and Turkey. Most “German” universities in the last quarter of the 18th Century were relics of the Middle Ages or pedagogically hyperactive Reformation periods. They had mostly been founded as princely or church institutions. By 1700 there were 28 on the territory of what would become the united Germany of 1871 (excluding the Habsburg lands). The vast majority struggled along with fewer than 300 students in 1700, or about 7,000 shared among them all, falling from 8,000 a century before and destined to fall further to 6,000 by 1790. With few exceptions, these universities came in for heavy criticism for their hidebound ways, ossified curricula, corruption, moral laxity and irrelevance to the scientific and philosophical ferment of the Enlightenment. At the beginning of the century, leading scientific lights such as Leibniz despaired of reforming them and led the movement to create new academies of science (such as the new one in Berlin) to bypass them. At the other end of the century, reformers called for their outright abolition.

Criticism of universities was of course not restricted to the German states or France. Edward Gibbon, the author of the pathbreaking *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), recalled his time at Oxford as “the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life” owing to the torpor of the faculty.¹ Oxford and Cambridge were at least rich in endowments, which could not be claimed by most Continental universities, largely dependent on student fees. One of the earliest acts of the French Revolution after 1789 was their abolition along with other parts of the shambolic *ancien régime*. The suppression of the Jesuit Order between 1767 and 1773 had a negative impact on teaching at Catholic institutions. The post-Reformation religious divisions among the German states and their universities tended to reinforce the authority and hyper-orthodoxy of the respective theological faculties, which often kept a tight hold on the

¹ *The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon* (New York: Meridian, 1961), 72.

other academic disciplines. At the same time, given the usual emptiness of state coffers, professors could be compensated (in addition to risible salaries and student fees) with monopolistic concessions, e.g. to sell alcohol or firewood, or by produce from the leased farmland constituting their meager endowment. These commercial activities distracted some of them so much that they neglected their lecture courses or did not finish the material by the end of the semester.

Once installed in a full professorship (*Ordinariat*), teachers tended to stay put, since there was little academic mobility. It was not uncommon to encounter multi-generational professorial “families” created by nepotism and intermarriage. Appointments made by non-scholarly criteria such as family or collegial “connections” – given the small and evidently diminishing rewards of professorships – trumped attempts to lure innovative fresh blood. The “ordinary” professoriate may have totaled around 650 in the non-Austrian “German” lands (and slightly under 800 including the six Austrian universities) in 1796. While this produced a “teacher/student ratio” of something close to 1:10, that was not necessarily a good thing, since there were fewer student fees to finance the faculty’s work. And while there were auxiliary lecturers (“extraordinary” professors and “private docents”), these were almost exclusively people waiting and hoping for an appointment as an *Ordinarius* but also moonlighting from some other lines of work, since *their* compensation from all sources fell far short of a living. Writing offered some hope for further financial gain, but the “market” favored encyclopedic works and textbooks. Anything like the sort of scholarly and scientific publication announcing new discoveries by professors – the “monograph” or specialized journal article – lay several decades ahead in the 19th Century. The more active university faculty members might be admiringly called *Gelehrte* (savants), with broad-based knowledge. But few experienced encouragement to bore deeply into problems. Indeed, the reward system of the traditional university favored breadth and popularity over profundity and the newly-blazed path. Once appointed to a professorship, the multi-faceted scholar was often expected to move up the meager career and reward ladder by teaching first in the “arts” faculty, then in one or more of the “higher” faculties (in ascending order, medicine, law and theology). The last, as the “queen science,” for reasons already mentioned, was least open to new thinking. The legal faculty was somewhat more open to wandering off the arid path of Roman law, but not as much as some increasingly rationalistic state bureaucracies could desire. Since theology and law were the choice of the vast majority of German students aiming for professional careers, one can understand more readily the endless complaints of critics about the widening gap between university “knowledge” and contemporary intellectual needs.

III. Options to ossification or abolition: liberal mercantilism in Halle, Göttingen and elsewhere

As may be surmised from the above, many factors militated against reforming German universities even when isolated statesmen or savants, moved by new concepts of service to God and Caesar, developed the energy to try. Entrenched and conservative

senior professors, often personally enmeshed with ties to other local elites and (through their students) regional church and administrative hierarchies, remained practically immune to dismissal or disciplinary measures. Paltry as their incomes may have been, they derived largely from sources beyond the control of whatever state or church patrons might nominally loom over their heads. Economic inducements to reform remained rare, since most German states lived hand to mouth fiscally. Costly military actions ate up the majority of state budgets, with one or another wars or seizures of territory (as in the partitions of Poland) going on roughly half the years of the century. What little money remained for supporting innovative research seemed better spent on royal academies of science, such as set up in Prussia (1700), Hanover (1742) and Bavaria (1759).

To meet the perceived needs of youth for modern and practical education, another way around the difficulties of university reform lay in creating entirely new kinds of schools. The distaste of sons of the nobility for fusty university education (as well as their ability to pay) fueled the rise of so-called *Ritterakademien* (knights' academies) by the end of the 17th Century. These typically offered modern and useful knowledge lacking in the typical university curriculum: fencing, riding, dancing, modern languages, and other subjects useful for a future career in administration, court life and diplomacy. They offered a sort of substitute or continuation of the household tutor and/or the Grand Tour, but at less cost. Various military schools and academies and even special schools for military doctors, engineers and architects met the needs of students poorly served by universities.

A rarer option lay in creating new universities unencumbered by habitual inertia and designed in part to attract precisely the sons of the nobility targeted by *Ritterakademien*. One of the first, the Prussian University of Halle (opened 1694), was indeed grafted onto an existing knights' academy. Its ideological orientation drew heavily on the Pietist tradition of Lutheranism, elevating "practical" Christianity and moral living over theological hairsplitting and ritual. Its contours as a spiritual movement may be compared to those of John Wesley's Methodism, which it inspired in part. More importantly, Pietism (at least initially) allowed more scope for the introduction of new ideas than rival Protestant and Catholic orthodoxies. One of Halle's leading professors, Christian Thomasius, sought to combine the attractive modern curriculum of the knights' academy, scientific subjects and training for the civil service. Halle attracted many nobles (who paid higher fees and lent a certain social cachet), especially to study law, but it also attracted would-be pastors and schoolteachers in large numbers. The Pietist faculty grew more conservative after a generation or so, however, and with the expulsion of the popular early Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff in 1723, the university lost some of its luster as a seat of new learning.²

The possibility that a new university that de-emphasized theology, boosted law and the sort of modern subjects locatable in a "philosophical" (arts and sciences) faculty

² One of the first acts of Frederick II on mounting the Prussian throne in 1740 was to restore Wolff to his a professorship, but the damage to Halle's reputation had been done. For a more extensive discussion of 18th-Century reform movement, see MCCLELLAND, CHARLES E., *State, Society and University in Germany, 1700-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 34-93.

could also attract wealthy paying students was not lost on other German statesmen. One, Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen, functioned much like a viceroy to the absentee ruler of Hanover, George II of Britain. The new university at Göttingen (1734-7) aimed consciously at recruiting wealthy upper-class students from all over Europe (expected to pay high fees), mainly by teaching a kind of modern law that favored the rights of the nobility (as in England) as opposed to the “regalistic” justifications of expanded royal power (as in Prussian Halle). The nobles’ chamber of the Hanoverian estates general (*Stände*) gladly and generously supported an institution that would effectively promote their own Whiggish rights as well as reverse the fiscal drain implied in sending their own sons abroad or on Grand Tours for education. Hiring theologians unlikely to indulge in extremes or controversy, creating a new Academy of Sciences and a major library, paying top salaries (even to the elsewhere despised teachers in the Philosophical Faculty) to attract scholars who had achieved some wide popularity by publications all formed a part of the successful gamble in Göttingen and set new parameters for a modernized form of university education. In addition to emphasizing a new kind of law, it offered an upgraded version of the introduction to fashionable knowledge previously offered by the *Ritterakademie*, making the university into a kind of courtly finishing school and training ground for future modern administrators. Münchhausen himself oversaw his new creation as *Kurator* and later while serving as prime minister.

One new university (Erlangen, 1743) consciously copied the Göttingen model, and a few other old ones attempted some reforms along the same lines, but the inertia of most of the traditional faculties could not be broken until the increasingly powerful waves of change emanating from France after 1789 placed the “German university” before a potential inundation. The success of the new reformed institutions of higher learning, however, offered a real alternative. And many of the German leaders confronting the Napoleonic hammering of crumbling German institutions had themselves studied at the new universities.

IV. Post-Napoleon reforms: the age of the professor, 1810-1860

The wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon overturned the *ancien régime* in most neighboring lands and awoke in many of them new movements adumbrating epochal change. The thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire collapsed, and its nearly 1,800 member entities (from postage-stamp-sized baronies to great powers like Prussia) faced reorganization. Many universities disappeared along with the statelets that had harbored them. Like many invaders who posed as liberators, though, Napoleon fired a new national spirit of resistance. In Central Europe this involved retaining the *form* of the *universitas* while using the crisis to adopt many of the reforms mentioned above.

The founding of the University of Berlin (1810) may serve as a prime example. Halle, torn away from Prussia, had to be closed and a substitute found. The capital Berlin offered an affordable alternative with an empty palace, an excellent royal library, learned members of the Academy of Sciences willing to double as professors, and the pick of nationally noted and ambitious scholars, many recently unemployed because of school closures. During the short-lived period of Prussian reform, the new university achieved

relative autonomy to run its own affairs, an expanded degree of “academic freedom” for both teachers and students, and a high-minded set of pedagogical and research goals drawn from such thinkers as the philosophers Fichte and Schleiermacher as well as the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt. The reorganization and expansion of the public secondary school system, especially of the elite *Gymnasium*, along with tightened requirements for entering the civil service and higher teaching professions, gave an immense boost to the very *Fakultät* most likely to prove its new worth by placing a premium on *Wissenschaft* -- the “philosophical.” Not only formal philosophy (Hegel *et al.*) but philology (Boeckh), history (Ranke), geography (A. von Humboldt) and other natural sciences benefited from having internationally recognized, heavily researching and publishing professors. Law (Savigny) and, somewhat later, medicine (J. von Müller) became equally attractive faculties.

The success of Berlin (and the fallout from the post-1815 “Congress of Europe System”) stimulated other significant new findings (notably Bonn in 1819 and Munich in 1826) or royally decreed reforms among surviving older universities. Even when some royal decrees worked against academic freedom (as with the sacking of the “Göttingen Seven” professors resisting royal trampling on the Hanoverian constitution in 1837), other rival German princes were happy to snap up the distinguished victims. The relative and fragile academic freedom at many universities, at a time of widespread reactionary oppression, helped focus unprecedented attention on professors as spokesmen for new political and social movements including nationalism and liberalism. Many professors, along with their students, became involved in the upheavals of 1848-9, although the revolutionary Frankfurt “parliament of professors” was largely misnamed. Its failure to impose a unified, constitutional and parliamentary regime on Germany did, however, awaken such defenders of monarchy and elites as Bismarck to pursue unification from above.

Though economically weak, the enlarged German states surviving the Napoleonic era found in the pursuit of culture and *Wissenschaft* a relatively affordable way to enhance their legitimacy and popularity with a growing middle class. Famous professors and their best students entered a seller’s market as academic mobility increased. In the emerging realm of public sphere (Jürgen Habermas’ *Öffentlichkeit*), professors speaking and writing even outside their field of expertise provided much of the leadership of cultural, political and scientific innovation. Universities were still generally small and undifferentiated enough for a handful of chair-holders to exercise a disproportionate influence locally and even nationally, even as they trained the ranks of civil servants, teachers, pastors and authors shaping the new national culture.

V. Expansion, complexity, new clienteles: the age of the institute, 1860-1918

The half-century from the 1860s on witnessed not only an astonishing expansion of the German higher-education system but also of the socio-economic, political and military upheavals and growth that partly drove that expansion and differentiation. Rapid industrialization, population growth and urbanization, national unification with popular

participation under Prussian hegemony and an unprecedented optimism about the importance of science and learning characterized the German *Reich* founded in 1871. Disposing over new wealth, many German federal states (often emulated by Austro-Hungarian and other foreign educational systems) invested more heavily in secondary schools preparing for university, as well as in upgraded technical education including polytechnic colleges, gradually upgraded to university status by 1900.

Student numbers had changed little in the half-century since the end of the Napoleonic wars, and there were actually fewer students in the period 1840-70 (ca. 12-13,000 annually) than there had been in 1830. But then enrollments leaped dramatically to 21,000 (1880), over 28,000 in 1890, and over 53,000 in 1910. Growth in post-secondary student numbers would have been even more dramatic were it not for the practical sundering of universities (with their traditional four faculties) from burgeoning technical colleges. This demand provoked a considerable expansion and differentiation in the professoriate as well. At the University of Berlin, normally Germany's largest, the total number of full professors grew from only 49 in 1830 to 52 in 1860, but from then to 1910, to 94. The major bearers of new teaching and research functions, however, were the associate professors and lecturers (*Privatdozenten*), constituting a little over half the faculty members in 1830 but over 80% by 1910. In that year, the mostly unsalaried lecturers (remunerated by student fees) constituted 60% of the teaching body out of a total of 491.³ This was a cost-effective way for governments to cope (if not precisely keep up) with added student demand. Yet the widening gap between the full professors (*Ordinarien*) and the younger lecturers hoping someday to replace them tended to harden into an institutional hierarchy, since the dozens of new state-financed "institutes" -- intended to promote research as well as learning *through* research -- were dominated by full professors, and university self-government was also their exclusive bailiwick. Certain faculties, notably the medical and "philosophical" (arts and science), far outstripped theology and law, with medical and "philosophy" teaching positions increasing, respectively, by 400% and nearly 200% from 1860 to 1910.

The rapid rise of the institutes, seminars and laboratories (collectively called *Institute*) reflected to a large degree the intensity of research in expanding knowledge-fields such as medicine as well as natural, humanistic and social sciences. The older tradition at Berlin and elsewhere was for chair holders to provide their own working materials and tools, usually in their own homes, except for some obvious need for separately housed materials, from libraries to medical clinics. But with the differentiation of disciplines after the 1860s, especially from the 1880s onward, new subdisciplines and fields previously considered mere adjuncts to serious study (for example, modern foreign languages) were upgraded to the status of independent scholarly disciplines. Comparing the list of institutes in 1860 and 1910, one notes that the theological faculty had changed the least. The law faculty, while adding three seminars and a library, tended (with theology) not to raise the discipline to a "scientific/research" level like the other two faculties. This was less because their professors eschewed

³ Charles E. McClelland, „Die disziplinar organisierte Forschungsuniversität, 1860-1918,“ in Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, (ed.), *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden, 1810–2010: Biographie einer Institution, Praxis ihrer Disziplinen*, 6 vols., (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2010-13), I, 432, Table 16.

research. But the training of pastors, judges, lawyers and administrators required a relatively closed, syncretic approach (e.g., legal codification) rather than revolutionary “discoveries”. By comparison, the medical faculty had 12 self-standing specialized institutes, nearly 20 hospital-affiliated clinics and departments and ten other institutes and collections (some subdivided into multiple departments with their own professorial chiefs). The philosophical faculty welcomed 18 new institutes (some with numerous departments) to the original single one in the humanistic disciplines. The natural sciences gained 17 new institutes (the majority in their own expensive separate quarters, labs etc.) sealing Berlin’s reputation in the natural sciences by World War I. By 1914 this so-called Friedrich-Wilhelm University had almost 70 institutes, seminars or comparable separate entities devoted to research and advanced instruction. And while other universities, especially smaller ones, could not match these numbers, their trend went in the same direction.

Together the three largest urban universities in Germany (Berlin, Munich and Leipzig) enrolled nearly half of all students in the country by 1914. But even at the other 19 medium and small institutions, the expansion of the student body meant that the university no longer recruited mostly from the professional middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) and aristocracy, respectively deriving their social standing from education or lineage, but increasingly also from commercial and business families (*Besitzbürgertum*) and even less wealthy strata of the white-collar class known as *Mittelstand*. Germany arguably had the most socially open higher education system in Europe by World War I, even though critics worried that “overproduction” of graduates (and even female ones by 1914) would create “jobless people with doctorates.”

The fusion of the dual roles of post-secondary teaching and cutting-edge research in the German university was indeed cast into a sort of consensual myth in the first years of the 20th Century – named for the Prussian civil servant responsible for founding the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Yet even as his furtherance of the fusion of teaching and research was being celebrated as a unique creation of German *Kultur*, it was becoming obvious that the research needs of an advanced industrial society could no longer be met exclusively by the research-university model based in the multiple, culturally-autonomous federal states. A national “pure” research foundation, the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft* (now known as the Max Planck Society), largely privately financed to create and maintain an expanding chain of initially natural-science institutes outside universities, was ironically announced by Kaiser Wilhelm II at the centenary celebration of the University of Berlin in 1910.⁴

VI. Prestige abroad, domestic decline and the Nazi catastrophe, 1918-1945

World War I had catastrophic consequences for German universities. Most male students and many younger professors were reserve officers, so what was left of normal

⁴ See Charles E. McClelland, “Inszenierte Weltgeltung einer prima inter pares? Die Berliner Universität und ihr Jubiläum 1910,” in *Die Berliner Universität im Kontext der deutschen Universitätslandschaft*, ed. Rüdiger vom Bruch (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 243–254.

teaching and research involved skeleton crews, the recuperating wounded, and an increasing number of women students. The virtual national bankruptcy in the wake of the Paris peace treaties and nightmare inflation reduced universities, like many other institutions, to a threadbare existence. Driven perhaps by the notion that it was better to call oneself “student” than “unemployed person,” and with further opening of access to university education by the new governments of the Weimar Republic, young people overwhelmed the lecture halls and institutes. Resentments resulting from cutthroat competition for scarce employment for university graduates (now including not only disproportionate numbers of Jews and foreigners, but large numbers of women) undoubtedly also made traditional male students ripe for the nationalistic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic and sexist propaganda line of the Nazi Party even before the full onset of the world Depression of 1929. The Nazi promise to the aspirants to the class of educated professionals was to throttle the access to university education by these “non-Aryan” and “denatured” people (code for, among others, professional women).

The purges of German universities after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 added insult to penury. The dismissal from professorships of hundreds of leading scholars and scientists on political or racial grounds during the 1930s constituted an immense loss to German leadership in all academic fields (and an immense gain for the foreign countries willing to invite them, like the United States). Even as German professors reaped a harvest of recognition for pre-war achievements (e.g., Nobel Prizes), ignorant and ideology-driven Nazi policy promoted such nonsense as “Aryan physics” (declaring that anything dreamed up by such Jews as Einstein had to be wrong). Some disciplines in higher education were more deeply corrupted by Nazi research imperatives than others. Law and medicine, for example, suffered more from Nazi interference than some fields; and Hitler’s interest in the magic of technology promoted some areas of engineering science. But whatever the gains and losses due to Nazi peacetime policies (1933-9), universities and technical colleges were drained of manpower and ultimately as good as shut down as World War II rumbled toward the defeat and destruction of Germany by 1945.

VII. Rebuilding, stagnation, expansion, 1945-present

Universities were in many ways even more profoundly affected by “Zero Hour” as 1945 came to be known. With most of their buildings bombed out, with faculty and students dead, crippled or in POW camps, with little functioning government after the German capitulation to the four occupying Allies, and with resources scarce, they were in many ways candidates for radical makeovers. Initially joint Allied “denazification” programs carried out further purges of faculty members (but only in rare cases were able to attract back those who had been purged by the Nazis). The rapid development of the Cold War between the USSR and the other victor-occupiers (USA, UK and France) signaled a relaxation of purges of Nazi fellow-travelers by the latter, but in some ways an intensification by the former. Thus the western Allies (at varying rates) began to ignore or water down recommendations for radical reshaping of university education by their

own national expert panels.⁵ Universities in the Soviet-occupied zone around Berlin, after an initial period of tolerating both bourgeois and Communist “antifascists,” pursued their own increasingly radical version of rebuilding universities and other higher educational and scientific institutions along Soviet lines. (The creation of a Free University in West Berlin by students and faculty withdrawing from radical Communist interference in the venerable University of Berlin, now in the Soviet occupation sector, constituted one dramatic response.) By 1949, with the official creation of rival West German (FRG) and East German (GDR) states, one could speak with less and less accuracy of a “German university system” sharing similarly organized institutions and goals. West Germany (along with Germanophone Switzerland and, after 1955, de-occupied and neutral Austria) more or less continued a restoration of pre-war and (at least nominally) pre-fascist norms, while East Germany followed a model similar all over the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact countries. In the former model, higher education remained largely a concern of the federal states, but largely autonomous; in the latter, subject to centralized and Party control, with most serious research (as opposed to teaching) functions reassigned to national academies of science.

While the post-1949 political stability under the FRG’s dominant Christian Democrats long favored “restoration” rather than innovation in universities, the GDR consciously used reforms to turn them into agencies of social and political engineering. To promote a loyal educated elite, it favored university attendance for the offspring of party loyalists (to the increasing disadvantage of “bourgeois” students) and even introduced “peasant and worker faculties” to overcome the long-standing tradition of practical exclusion of those social classes from higher education. Such reforms brought charges that GDR universities were being transformed into *Kaderschmiede* (mills for turning out party cadres). Also following the Soviet model, responsibility for much original research was transferred out of universities and into institutes supervised by an academy of sciences. But the self-styled “democratic” GDR did not throw open the gates to hordes of students. Its social system did not require large numbers of theologians and lawyers; and it suffered a chronic shortage of workers, partly because millions fled to the west. Its third university reform program begun in 1968 aimed at homogenizing structures, combining traditional institutes into department-like “sections”, emphasizing practical aspects of knowledge and generally trying to push college-age students in a direction of vocational training rather than university study. In the wake of this last reform, the number of GDR university students reached a high point of 143,000 in 1970, only to fall back about 10% until the end of the regime.⁶

The growing prosperity of the FRG and the shift leftward of national politics starting with the “Great Coalition” of 1969 and leading on to socialist-dominated governments opened the way for reform and expansion of higher education opportunity there. The world-wide student protest movement of the 1960s took on especially dramatic contours in West German universities. In response to demands for democratization of

⁵ Charles E. McClelland, “American Reform Efforts: German Professional Education after World War II,” in Jürgen Heideking, Mark Depaepe and Jürgen Herbst (eds.), *Mutual Influence on Education: Germany and the United States in the Twentieth Century*, *Paedagogica Historica, New Series*, 33 (1997), 265-75.

⁶ <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/249273/umfrage/studenten-in-der-ddr/>

higher education, new universities (and later new types of tertiary institutions such as *Gesamthochschulen* and *Fachhochschulen* -- Comprehensive and Applied Science Universities) were founded, student numbers stimulated to rise dramatically (with more inclusive admission standards) and study made affordable through federal grants to students (Federal Training Assistance Act --BAföG). A federal “framework law” for higher education (the 1976 *Hochschulrahmengesetz*) attempted sweeping structural reforms. Other changes with “democratic” intent reduced the traditional power of the professoriate in favor of students and staff. The resulting increase of students -- from just under 250,000 in 1965 to over three times that number a decade later and 1.5 million in 1989 -- ran parallel to increasing academic unemployment. The addition of the former GDR to the FRG in 1990 as well as further normal growth led to a student population of 2.6 million in 2013.⁷ Despite efforts to increase teaching staff and limit access to some popular disciplines (*numerus clausus*), chronic overcrowding has plagued most universities and other tertiary institutions for decades.

The “German” university has also fallen under the sway of the Bologna Process (since 1999), multinational agreements intended to harmonize higher education systems of virtually all European and some Asian countries. One result for Germany has been the reintroduction of bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Critics complain, however, that some of the goals of the process, such as increasing global student mobility and reducing the length of tertiary education, have not been achieved. Narrowing of curriculum to focus on employable “skills” rather than traditional *Bildung* is another frequent lament among academics. As in many other countries under the impact of globalization, critics complain about the increase in bureaucratic control, a decrease in autonomy of teaching and research and the intrusion of “business models” inappropriate to higher education. Finally, in an attempt to counteract the creeping mediocrity of the “mass university” German governments have dangled extra funding (in so-called “*Exzellenz*” competitions) before those who aspire to become “elite” institutions. Again critics complain that the rewards of “elite” status tend to go to institutions “excelling” in *applied* and marketable knowledge such as engineering.

VIII. Signs and signifiers: the university in state and society

Debates about the direction of German higher education are of course nothing new. The university whose “death” contemporary critics bemoan is that of the Humboldt brothers, mentioned above. The reality of the “Humboldt model” itself has recently come into question as an artificial construct, largely concocted over a century ago by the Berlin theology professor and impresario of research institutions (such as the Kaiser Wilhelm-Society) Adolf von Harnack. Ironically enough, the revival of fragments of Humboldtian thought about the idealistic purpose of higher education – the formation of fully-developed adult personalities – coincided with the diminution of the universities’ role in

⁷ <https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/LangeReihen/Bildung/lrbil01.html>;
<https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/BildungForschungKultur/Hochschulen/Hochschulen.html>

expanding practical and economically-oriented research, as if to console them for their relative loss of power and funding⁸

Whatever the ritual invocations of high-minded *raison d'être*, the German university has always in practice carried out a professional training mission. Whether aimed at literate Protestant pastors and schoolteachers, competent and loyal legally-trained civil servants, or science-oriented physicians produced by university clinics and labs (as promoted by the Wilhelmine-Prussian cultural administrator Friedrich Althoff), university education was normally expected to meet the changing perceived needs of state and society. And the professoriate often proved willing not only to pursue *Wissenschaft* for its own sake but to bend it to serve political causes such as national unity, the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s or militarism. One must also recall that the cultural autonomy of the federal states comprising “Germany” throughout most of modern history promoted not only a healthy rivalry among quite diverse institutions but also local innovations and the refreshing chance for professorial and student mobility.

Yet the very same reformed institution emerging from the Napoleonic wars became so wedded to its four traditional faculties that it generally pushed away the training for newer emerging professions, from engineering and applied science to business administration, the fine arts and primary education. The consequent creation or elevation of special tertiary schools for such increasingly academic but allegedly vulgar “new” professions spelled the end of the universities’ domination of tertiary education at least since the raising of polytechnical schools (*Technische Hochschulen*) to equal status in 1900. The visions of Humboldt and Harnack a century apart could not easily withstand the contempt for academic traditions shown so forcefully from Adolf Hitler to the last GDR dictator Erich Honecker over much of the following century.

And yet certain features of the German university remain as a legacy. The notion that academic freedom is a vital underpinning of all *Wissenschaft* – physical as well as social and humanistic knowledge – produced certain institutional guarantees that are still visible as far away from Germany as the USA. The adoption of a version of German academic “tenure” for professors, promoted by John Dewey and his American Association of University Professors from 1915 on, is one example. Despite the erosion of the German “model” by Americanization and globalization in recent decades, the respect and deference accorded graduates – especially with the prized title *Herr/Frau Doktor* – reflects an alternative way of valuing knowledge that may outlast some societies’ proclivity to admire instant billionaires, popular celebrities or other curiosities flashing and eclipsing in the global media. Much as careful scholarship has deconstructed the “myth” extracted from the scattered writings of the Humboldt brothers, the *ideals* behind the questionable ritualized assertions that the German university actually accorded all the benefits of scientific thinking and rich personality development to all students remain a legacy vital still today. The notion that the “university” should be not only a public trust, as a repository of old culture, but a laboratory for the infinite development of

⁸ See Mitchell G. Ash (ed.), *German Universities Past and Future* (Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1997).

human knowledge, and that it should be kept as immune as possible from being instrumentalized by outside political, military or commercial interests, comes down to today's world largely from German examples and experiences.

Even though university festivals and student music barely resemble the old, elaborate ones of the Wilhelmine era, some students still intone the old Latin favorite, originally an 18th-Century German product, *Gaudeamus igitur*. It might be appropriate to recall its continued utility today: *Vivat academia/Vivant professores/Vivat membrum quodlibet/Vivat membra quaelibet/Semper sint in flore*.

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