S. FISCHER VERLAGE

Ute Frevert

Powerful Emotions (Mächtige Gefühle):

German History since 1900

The Emotional World of the Germans: A Totally Different History of the Twentieth Century

Emotions make history. They shape and direct not only individuals but entire societies. Politicians use them, but they can also trip over them. Ute Frevert explores powerful emotions and their impact: in the Kaiser Reich, the Weimar Republic, the National Socialist state, the GDR (East Germany), and in the former and new German Federal Republic. She describes various forms and meanings of love and hatred, shame and pride, indignation and grief.

Hatred, for instance, powered National Socialism, but has no place in a democracy. At the start of the nineteenth century, people associated different kinds of longing with love than they do today. Frevert also explains why Germans enthused about war in 1914 and were proud of their national football team in 2006, and she delves into envy every bit as much as trust.

Frevert succeeds in giving a very special insight into the history of the German people, who, inhabiting six different states over the past **120 years, have experienced an extremely wide range of emotions.**

Ute Frevert, born in 1954, is considered one of Germany's most important historians. She teaches Modern History in Berlin, Konstanz and Bielefeld. She was a Professor at Yale University from 2003 to 2007, since 2008 she is heading up the research department 'History of Emotions' at the Max-Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung in Berlin. She was awarded the renowned LEIBNIZ PRIZE in 1998 by the the German Research Foundation (DFG) and in 2016 received the FEDERAL CROSS OF MERIT FIRST CLASS. She was the 2020 recipient of the SIGMUND FREUD PRIZE FOR ACADEMIC PROSE.

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Translated by Jefferson Chase

The Power of Emotions and German History

Every single one of us knows from experience that emotions are powerful. They move us, color our relationships and attitudes toward the world and determine what we think counts and what we find irrelevant. It's less obvious, however, how emotions influence and affect the larger course of history, which goes beyond individuals, and how emotions themselves are influenced by history. That is the subject of this book.

Why should we be interested in this topic? Do we understand the world better when we pay attention to emotions and how they work? Does this perspective yield new insights and knowledge? Do the past and present appear in a different light?

The answer to all these questions is yes. Even a cursory glance at current developments and experiences show what effect emotions have. Take for example the murders of nine people with immigrant backgrounds by a far-right extremist in the city of Hanau in February 2020, an act caused grief, rage and shame in much of the German populace. Or, perhaps most obviously, the coronavirus that has been spreading since early 2020, whose containment has challenged society, science and the economy in unprecedented ways. Fear and longing for security go hand in hand with love, solidarity and concern for those who are most at risk from the deadly disease. We only realize how tight our emotional ties to relatives, friends, colleagues and neighbors truly are, when we are no longer allowed to come in close proximity to them. Trust and distrust have enormous significance for our attempts to overcome the pandemic. Do we as citizens have faith in the state when it dramatically curtails our liberties? Do we follow its instructions? Or do we mistrust the government and reject what it tells us? Do we trust our fellow human beings? How great is our sense of solidarity, and when does it begin to tear apart? Resentments that have arisen in the crisis between town and country, natives and foreigners, eastern and western Germans awaken doubts about the often-invoked need for society to stick together. Our empathy with our hard-hit neighbors has limits, but it can also push back and cross boundaries.

Emotions Create History

These observations support the notion that emotions create history, motivating people to do and not do certain things, which then changes the course of events. This is true for the Hanau killer as well as for the attacker of a synagogue in Halle who, as he stated, acted out of hatred for Jews and women. This is also true for the people who were outraged by such deeds and mobilized counter-emotions: empathy, solidarity, shame, affection and trust. It is true of politicians who try to draw practical conclusions from such stories and better protect Muslim and Jewish sites and meeting places, do more to combat hatred on the Internet and keep far-right extremists under better surveillance. In all of these examples, emotions get translated into concrete actions, thereby accruing a power capable of moving entire societies.

The same was the case in 2015 at the height of the so-called refugee crisis. Many Germans were shocked and horrified at the televised images from the camps along the refugees' route through the Balkans. According to the headline of the tabloid Bild am Sonntag newspaper from September 6 of that year, the Hungarian government's harsh policies were perceived as something "shameful." When Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to get rid this source of shame and allow refugees to enter Germany, she was assuming, with good reason, that these people's "march of hope" through Turkey to Europe could only be stopped with a massive use of force and that the resulting images would be intolerable to the German public. The photo of a three-year-old Syrian child who had drowned when his family tried to flee across the Mediterranean had already unleashed a tidal wave of sympathy. Against this backdrop, the chancellor's decision not to seal the borders seemed both logical and unavoidable.

Her instincts were confirmed when countless Germans turned out to greet the new arrivals and provide them with basic necessities. Volunteers organized welcome fairs and buffets, children donated stuffed animals, and churches made themselves available as emergency quarters. The empathy of masses of people was what paved the way for the decision to keep Germany's borders open. This phenomenon was repeated, albeit in dramatically diluted form, five years later when pressure from civic society increased to the point that the German government was forced to let in children from hopelessly overcrowded Greek refugee camps.

At the same time, emotions like empathy and sympathy aren't forces of nature. They don't crash over people's heads irregularly and arbitrarily, robbing them of their reason and seducing them to act as they never would have under normal circumstances. Although there is a long philosophical and medical tradition that considers emotions this way, it is neither credible nor correct. Recent anthropological and sociological research has shown that emotions are highly determined by experiences and culture. They pick up on what people have been through, individually and collectively, just as they draw from a socio-cultural repertoire that gives them value and significance. How and what people feel is always dependent on what they've learning about feelings.

Neurological studies have confirmed that this is the case. On the one hand, they've broken down the classic dichotomy of reason and emotion. Emotions, these studies have shown, are closely connected to cognitive functions and work together with them across the entire human brain. On the other hand, these connections are the result of life-long processes of learning that vary temporally, spatially and socially. American psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett speaks of "constructed emotions," shaped, created and modelled by human beings themselves.

Historical experiences play a large role in this process. In Germany, images of desperate people fleeing civil war and homelands destroyed by violence awaken memories of how millions of Germans were driven from their homes and forced to take flight after the Second World War. Moreover, the sight of forbiddingly high fences designed to keep out refugees on the Hungarian border is difficult to square with unforgotten and unforgettable euphoria unleashed by the end of the Cold War and the opening of Hungarian-Austrian border in the summer of 1989.

1 A family of German refugees in 1948 © Bundesarchiv (BArch)

2 Summer 1989, East Germans pour across the border between Hungary and Austria.

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Along with personal experiences and collective memories, social institutions and the media also affect our emotions. Without the flood of television images of the refugees in 2015, the German populace would never have been so sensitive to their plight and prepared to help. Family, school and religion, too, influence how people deal with themselves and their environment, as do experiences in the workplace, at sporting events and in choirs, clubs, activist movements and political parties. Everywhere they go, people encounter rules and practices that suggest some emotions are appropriate while making others taboo. Gender and age are often decisive factors. What applies to men may not apply to women and vice versa, and we expect different emotional behavior from young people than from older ones. In previous centuries, when religion and churches determined what people did and didn't do, Protestants, Catholics and Jews could be differentiated by their feelings. The meaning of love, humility, sympathy, envy or desire varied according to religious faith and affiliation.

Emotions Have A History

Emotions not only make history. They are also made by it, subject to social influences that change over space and time. For that reason, emotions are historical. They themselves have a history, indeed, multiple ones. For starters, the occasions and context that trigger certain emotions change. The fear of war and conflict that could be felt everywhere after two world wars was largely absent before 1914, all the more so in Germany because the previous conflict, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, cost very few lives while bringing huge financial gain. Around 1900, no one was afraid of terrorism or climate change. Instead, they feared epidemics like cholera and typhoid fever. As the danger of dying from infectious diseases receded, this fear disappeared. When the corona pandemic arrived in Europe in early 2020, many people no longer knew what it was like to fear getting infected with a disease. As late as mid-March, with rates of infection shooting up and Italians and French barely allowed to leave their homes, only a half of Germans surveyed said that they avoided crowded spaces and public transport. Only four in ten said that they were limiting their social contact, while one in four considered fear of the disease to be "completely exaggerated."

Secondly, even fears we still have today used to feel different. In the late nineteenth century, people fell ill to cancer and died, but they dealt differently with that disease, arriving at other interpretations and heeding other recommendations and prohibitions. That affected the feelings of cancer suffers. Even when they were on death's door, they didn't give their fear of the disease the same scope it possesses and demands today. Here, too, people's religiosity was decisive. People who believed in life after death and the community of the living and the dead died more unencumbered and cheerfully than people who face nothingness.

Emotions are also socially framed in that they go through boom-and-bust cycles. Anthropologists distinguish between "hot" and "cold" cultures. Cold cultures admit little change, whereas hot ones celebrate innovation and creativity. But hot and cold can also refer to the intensity with which emotions and passions appear within a society. It is no accident that in the early days of Federal Republic of Germany there were constant appeals to sobriety and objectivity as a political style to replace the malevolently exalted emotionality of the Third Reich. Year for year, the first German President Theodor Heuss, to name a prominent example, cautioned his fellow Germans to remain "sober," not give in to "illusions" and to free themselves from the "shackles of buzzwords and ideologies" that "recalled the terrible time in which commotion and baring music displaced the give and take of reasons and counter-reasons."

Such warnings were part of a politics of emotionality with which prominent personages and institutions sought to regulate the emotional economy of German society. One aspect of this phenomenon is specifying which emotions are positive and acceptable and which aren't. How much national pride can Germans afford to feel? How much solidarity and empathy are necessary so that society doesn't freeze up and over? Who deserves understanding, and who doesn't? How to deal with envy? The answers to these questions are never simple or unanimous. Democracies always struggle with them since they cannot simply order a certain politics of emotions from on high. Their citizens listen with varying degrees of attentiveness to what their presidents, chancellors and city council chairs tell them in their Christmas and New Year's addresses and throughout the rest of the year. But those citizens also follow their own agendas, alone and in communities, depending on where they live and their social status, sex, age, religion and belief systems. They don't allow emotions to be

dictated to them and react negatively to attempted manipulation. Especially since the final third of the twentieth century, many people insist on their uniqueness and emotional autonomy.

But this perspective, too, fails to tell the whole story. Without doubt, every individual has his or her own feelings and (mostly) knows them well. Nonetheless, emotions are never merely subjective or purely private. If they were, they couldn't be used to communicate. In order for the language of emotions, which consists of words, gestures and bodily expressions, to be understandable, emotions have to be sharable and communicable. Such communication may take place via a friendly chat, at a concert or opera performance, or and at sports arenas, public viewings and political demonstrations. Such situations create perceived communities of emotion of varying duration. Many of them continue to affect people their whole lives through.

Still, the fact that emotions have a language and can be communicated doesn't automatically mean that they are put into words and shared. Not everyone wears their heart on their sleeve, keeps a diary or maintains friendships in which they can articulate what's going on inside them. Not everyone reads affecting novels and becomes familiar with emotions they perhaps have never experienced in real life. Who is touched by present-day apps intended to communicate affection? Who adopts the expectations of the Danish sense of hygge or the demands of wokeness? Such practices have a historical and cultural place. They are not common to all cultures, epochs and social groups.

Emotional Signatures of the Twentieth Century

In retrospect, the twentieth century was an emotionally turbulent and communicative period. It commenced with celebrations and elated hopes. Never, people said in 1900, had humanity (in Western and Central Europe) lived so well. The balance of what had been attained in the past was excellent and raised expectations for even better things to come. Humanity could be proud of what it had achieved. The melancholy of the fin de siècle seemed to have been overcome. Tension and conflict, at least in editorials and speeches, had been forgotten.

Fourteen years later saw the outbreak of a world war no one knew would be the first of a pair. People not infrequently welcomed this conflict and invested it with

lofty hopes that would seldom be fulfilled. The war disrupted social orders throughout Europe, drew new borders, brought old empires crashing down and created new states. For Germany, it ended with a nasty surprise. German defeat caught most of the populace unawares since until the very last the military high command had assured people victory was nigh. Many Germans felt that the Allies' terms of peace were unfair and humiliating. Others considered the German revolution of 1918 as a dishonorable betrayal and a stab in the back of the country's bravely fighting army. Such people whipped up a fanatic hatred of socialists, who were blamed for the war's disastrous outcome. Political polarization, uncompromising hostility between Right and Left, was the biggest burden placed upon the nascent Weimar Republic.

Nonetheless, this republic began optimistically in 1919 and vigorously tackled the task of political and social reform. Women, who had been previously excluded from elections, were given the right to vote and even became representatives in parliament, where they took up causes of social justice and tried to temper destructive emotional outbursts. There were democratic breakthroughs in educational and social policy, city planning experimented with spacious, fresh-air residential developments, and the cultural scene was full of creative turmoil. Young women stopped wearing their skirts and hair long, engaged in sports and looked to the heroines of the silver screen for role models. In cities, bars for homosexuals and sexual counselling offices advocating "modern marriages" opened up. Halfway between Paris and Moscow, Berlin became the capital of the avantgarde – tout le monde met there.

But Berlin was also home to far-right racist politicians like Joseph Goebbels. In 1926 he became the Gauleiter of the city, in 1928 a parliamentary deputy, and in 1930 the Reich propaganda director of the Nazi Party. While Goebbels was spewing bile in speeches to the Reichstag, the most important battles were being waged on the street between fascists, communists, socialist and the police. The Nazis' popularity skyrocketed with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929; by July 1932 they had become the largest party in the Reichstag with 37 percent of the vote. There was no comparable force of the left sight. Together, the Social Democrats and the Communists may have represented 36 percent of the vote, but they hated and fought one another bitterly.

Meanwhile, the bourgeois center, always ambiguous about the Weimar Republic, was disintegrating. Some of these people decided to "go with the times" and accept the republic as the least of all evils while remaining monarchists at heart. Others drifted toward far-right nationalism. With the death of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann in 1929, the rifts became impossible to ignore. On the one hand, hundreds of thousands paid tribute before his casket. Count Harry Kessler described his Berlin funeral procession as "endless." Kessler wrote: "The Reichbanner [association of democratic war veterans] gave him a guard of honor from the Reichstag to Wilhelmstrasse. In front of the Foreign Ministry, the procession halted. The window of Stresemann's office was covered in black, and on the balustrade before the window was a basket of white lilies. It was the most moving and human sight." On the other hand, the day after this "popular funeral," a bitter struggle broke out over Stresemann's political legacy. Even his own German People's Party spared no effort into trying to "falsely reinterpret him as something anti-republican and nationally chauvinistic so as to preserve the moral capital he left behind for the right wing." As the National Socialists gained in strength, the democratic and traditional conservative parties withered proportionally. Whereas in 1920 they had commanded roughly a quarter of votes, twelve years later their support had fallen below three percent.

Starting in 1933, one party alone set the tone, and that tone was highly emotional, promising politically obedient and racially approved "ethnic comrades" economic recovery, international respect and a unified national community fueled by "strength through joy." National honor and loyalty topped the emotional scale. Anyone the regime accused of betrayal landed in a concentration camp or on the scaffold. The hateful ideology of anti-Semitism became state doctrine and culminated in the cold-blooded murder of millions of Jewish men, women and children throughout Europe. The Wehrmacht and SS military units conducted an all-out war of unprecedented brutality in the east; nor did German occupiers treat populations in western and southern Europe with kid gloves. Although the number of the countrymen who fell in battle for "Führer, Volk and Vaterland" rose dramatically as of 1941, many Germans believed until the very end that their country would achieve final victory and sang along with film star Zarah Leander: "*I know a miracle will someday happen.*"

Instead of a miraculous final victory, what they got was unconditional capitulation. Germany's borders were redrawn, most radically in the east, and what remained of the country was occupied by the Allies and divided into four zones. In 1949, when those zones coalesced into two states, neither one was truly sovereign nor did either possess its own independent armed forces. Assigned to one of two blocs, both armed to the teeth, and utterly dependent on their respective superpowers, the two Germanys developed different social hallmarks, institutional forms and emotional styles. In 1989, when the citizens of Communist East Germany rose up in the first peaceful revolution in history on German soil, forcing their government to step down and paving the way for German reunification the following year, it wasn't difficult to differentiate between West and East Germans. They were separate species – with different bearing, language and clothing, different behavioral patterns, consumer habits and party preference. For this reason, the two halves of a country Willy Brandt and many others saw as belonging together have only grown back together slowly and hesitantly. Disappointment and resentment has abounded on both sides.