

FRANK TRENTMANN

# Germany at the Crossroads: A Nation between Past and Future

*"The way Frank Trentmann writes history, the way he brings together great and small, analysis and narrative, is wonderful."*

Bernhard Schlink on "Out of the Darkness"



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**T**he world is looking at Germany. Ever since the Federal Republic has appeared to be a model of economic efficiency and political stability. Now German trains are notorious for running late and populists make up the second biggest party in parliament. Since reunification, outsiders have asked, sometimes with trepidation, whether Germans would or could play a greater role on the world stage. The war in Ukraine and now the estrangement of the United States from Europe has made this question urgent. What are the roots of the current German crisis? Will the country be able to turn itself around? And, if it does, can the Germans be trusted?

In this short, accessible book, the renowned historian Frank Trentmann places the current challenges facing the Federal Republic into historical context. Trentmann writes from a unique perspective. With roots in Germany but living in London, he is simultaneously a deeply knowledgeable expert and a critical outsider. In this book, he puts Germany in a historical and comparative perspective, explaining unique features to foreign readers and highlighting major parallels that have tended to be overlooked. The book goes up to the present and includes the tensions with Donald Trump and the German election at the end of February 2025.

The book offers a behind-the-scenes look at Germany today to better understand its situation and to assess its potential for renewal. What makes the book unique is that it explores and connects the main crises facing the country – the challenges to democracy, the memory wars, economic stagnation, an ageing society and migration, and the difficulty of finding an international role.

Media, books and commentators have painted a picture of a country in terminal decline – “the sick man of Europe”, “kaput”, the death of the German model, or, in the words of Donald Trump, a country committing suicide. The current atmosphere of gloom and doom can be deceptive, though. This book traces the roots of today’s difficulties and shows how the Federal Republic has been confronted with profound challenges before. In the 1950s, it raised a new army against huge protests and revolutionised its pension system. In the 1960s and 70s, parliamentary democracy and the state were under pressure from students, pacifists, environmentalists and terrorists. In the 1980s, West Germany faced mass unemployment. After reunification in 1990, millions of people in the East had to rebuild their lives, and in the new millenium, the social welfare system was overhauled. Each time, Germany weathered the storm.

The book’s fresh perspective on the current situation is especially important because of Germany’s dark past. Many people worry: Is Germany on the brink of another 1933? “Never again” has been the watchword of many demonstrations inside the country. These anxieties are understandable given the horrors of the Nazi past and the recent surge of the populist right. But the analogy with 1933 can obscure other histories and memories that shed light on the present. These include efforts to boost democratic culture after 1945, the integration of twelve million Germans expelled from Eastern and Central Europe, and earlier tensions about how to remember the Second World War and the Holocaust. Broadening the time-frame is also vital for understanding what is perhaps the major problem facing Germany

today: the polarisation between East and West. In the recent national election on 23 February 2025, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) won 45 of 48 constituencies in the eastern part of the country. The East/West divide cuts across all areas: democracy, wealth, and attitudes to Russia, Israel and NATO. The book shows that it is too simple to reduce this divide to severe inequalities after reunification. Instead the story after 1990 needs to be connected to that before 1990. Both East Germans and West Germans took their experiences and ideas of normality with them into the reunified country. There are, however, certain core values that East and West share, notably faith in performance and hard work, merit and thrift. By opening up these historical perspectives, the book enables readers to look at Germany from new, often surprising angles, and understand better the struggles facing the country.

**Frank Trentmann**, author of *Empire of Things* and *Out of the Darkness*, is professor of history at Birkbeck, University of London, and at the University of Helsinki. He has taught at Princeton University and has been a visiting professor at the École des hautes études/Paris, the EUI/Florence, St Gallen/Switzerland, and the University of Chicago. He has been awarded the Whitfield Prize, a Humboldt Research Award, the Bochum Historians' Prize and he was a Moore Scholar at Caltech. He grew up in Hamburg and lives in London.

*Out of the Darkness: The Germans, 1942-2022* was

- Shortlisted for the 2024 Wolfson History Prize
- A Telegraph, Der Spiegel and The New Yorker Book of the Year
- Süddeutsche Zeitung's Number One Most Important Political Book of 2023
- Die Zeit, ZDF, Deutschlandfunk, taz Number One, Best Non-Fiction Books December 2023 and January 2024

At the heart of the book are the key questions that preoccupy Germany's neighbours and partners:

- Why does Germany struggle so to take on leadership in Europe? What will be its role in a multipolar world?
- How deep is its democratic culture really and can it withstand the rise of populism?
- What separates East and West Germany?
- Have the Germans learnt from their past, and what are the lessons they are taking from it?
- How welcoming or racist is Germany?
- Is the German economic model finished?

The book is organised in thematic chapters that guide the reader through these debates to answers.

1. Introduction
2. Democracy in Crisis? (Populism German-style, East and West, Covid, trust and conflict)
3. Memory Wars (over the Holocaust, colonialism, antisemitism, Israel and Gaza)
4. Shutdown/Germany Is Not Working (the economy, the "debt brake", productivity, the end of globalisation)
5. Ageing and Diversity (demographic crisis, gender inequality, care, lack of workers migration, racism)
6. Germany in the New World Disorder (Ukraine, Russia, the Middle East, the state of the army, people's ambivalence about NATO, Trump)
7. Conclusion

Delivery: The German MS will be delivered in March 2025 for publication in September 2025.

Preface for foreign editions: The author would be happy to write a special preface for foreign editions in light of events after spring 2025.