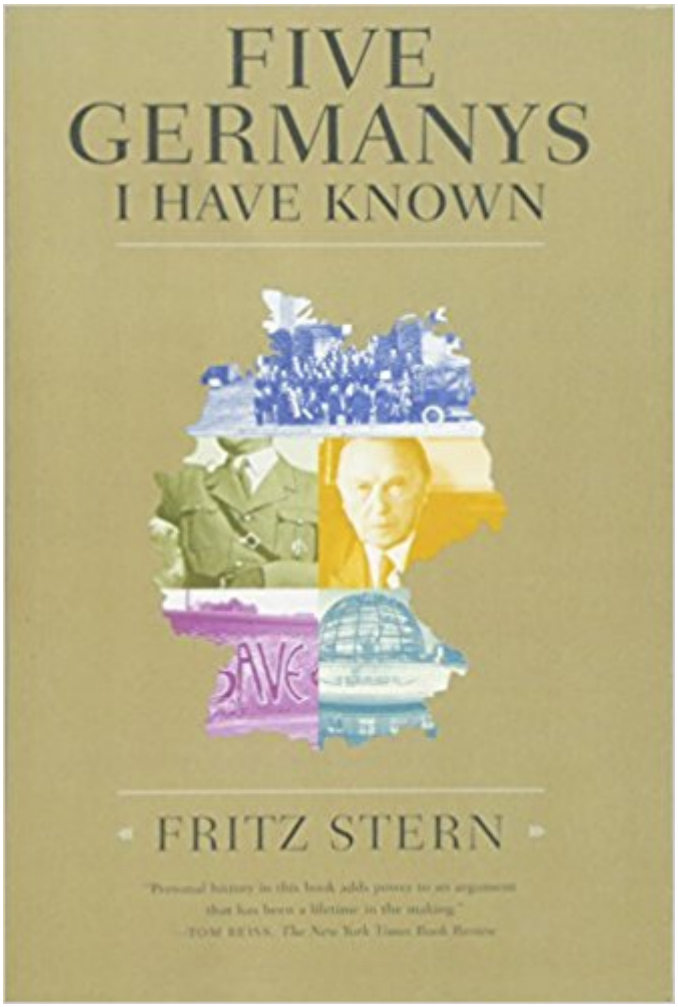
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Five Germanys I Have Known: A History & Memoir



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Synopsis

The "German question" haunts the modern world: How could so civilized a nation be responsible for the greatest horror in Western history? In this unusual fusion of personal memoir and history, the celebrated scholar Fritz Stern refracts the question through the prism of his own life. Born in the Weimar Republic, exposed to five years of National Socialism before being forced into exile in 1938 in America, he became a world-renowned historian whose work opened new perspectives on the German past.Stern brings to life the five Germanys he has experienced: Weimar, the Third Reich, postwar West and East Germanys, and the unified country after 1990. Through his engagement with the nation from which he and his family fled, he shows that the tumultuous history of Germany, alternately the strength and the scourge of Europe, offers political lessons for citizens everywhereÃ¢â ¬â ¢especially those facing or escaping from tyranny. In this wise, tough-minded, and subtle book, Stern, himself a passionately engaged citizen, looks beyond Germany to issues of political responsibility that concern everyone. Five Germanys I Have Known vindicates his belief that, at its best, history is our most dramatic introduction to a moral civic life.

Book Information

Paperback: 560 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (July 24, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374530866

ISBN-13: 978-0374530860

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.3 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 40 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #391,487 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #324 inÃ Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Germany #1201 inÃ Â Books > History > Europe > Germany #11012 inÃ Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Memoirs

Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In 1944, upon visiting the desolate ruins of Stalingrad, Gen. Charles de Gaulle reportedly said, with a touch of awe, "Quel peuple!" He was referring not to the Russians but to France and Russia’s mutual enemy, the Germans. According to Stern (Einstein’s German World), former provost of Columbia University and among the most venerable of America’s German historians, de Gaulle grasped the "deep ambiguity that hovers around German greatness": Germans

were not only the destroyers of historic Europe but also its creators. In this fascinating memoir, Stern looks back over the "five Germanys" his generation has seenÃ¢â ¬â •the Weimar Republic, Nazi tyranny, the post-1945 Federal Republic, the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic and, lastly, the reunited Germany of the presentÃ¢â ¬â •and explains how he came to reconcile himself with his birth country (which his Jewish family fled in 1938) as it has come to terms with its new place in today's more cohesive and peaceful Europe. His history, says Stern, can be read as "a text for political and moral lessons, as a drama in dread and hope." The book's intriguing structure makes it a wonderful combination of history, memoir, analysis and even poetry. (Aug.) Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One of the twentieth century's most distinguished scholars of modern European history, Stern has been the psychological explicator of the past, the effort to understand historical events as they were perceived by those who experienced them directly. Having grown up in prewar Breslau (in what is now Poland) before emigrating to New York in 1938, Stern has been dedicated to studying the cultural context of Nazism and the mind-set of its adherents. He now addresses the most incessant question of twentieth-century European history--how a nation as civilized as early-twentieth-century Germany could be responsible for the greatest horror in Western history--through the lens of his own trajectory through European and American history. Oscillating between historical narrative and memoir, Stern fuses the ambiguities and self-deceptions of Germany history from Weimar to the present with affectionate memories of his family; he also celebrates his engagement with the century's defining intellects, including Fritz Haber, Lionel Trilling, and Chaim Weizmann. The result is a brilliantly intimate portrait of both history and historian that shines with optimism about what the world can learn from Germany. Brendan DriscollCopyright Ã Â© American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Es ist vollbracht.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (It is accomplished!) I have finally finished reading this book that I have been gnawing on for four months. Why did I read all 511 pages of annoying fine print that my 75-year-old astigmatic eyes had severe trouble to cope with? Why did I chew and re-chew all these complicated constructed tapeworm sentences containing words I had never heard or seen before? Why did I take the trouble to look up these words, only to find many of these words not only missing in my modest ESL vocabulary but also in renowned dictionaries? Why did I bother to read every paragraph twice and some up to five times? Patience is not one of my

virtues. So why did I stick it out?The answer to the above questions: I found this book a treasure trove of knowledge about 20th century history. I had known so very little of this history.I blame GermanyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s chosen amnesia for this lack of education. Our history teachers in ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“GymnasiumÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (= high school and college combined) had started three times with the old Greeks, had enlightened us with the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“GoetterweltÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (pantheon) of the Greeks and the Romans, had hammered into us dates, names, and places of wars and battles, including names of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“FeldherrenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (military leaders), had fed us with dates and names of crusades, had carefully avoided the Spanish Inquisition (one does not wish to embarrass the Catholic Church), had bored us almost to death with the Stauffen Kaiser dynasty, had told us about Napoleon, Karl the Great, and a bit of Bismarck (yet by this time I might have already stopped listening because history classes, containing hardly anything but names and dates, were so terribly boring), and then stopped abruptly when approaching the year 1900, hurrying to return to the old Greeks. In other words: Our history teachers (assumedly following instructions of the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“KultusministeriumÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• [ministry of education]) had shied away from the infamous German history of the early and middle 20th century like from the plague. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •One does not wish to embarrass former German nationalists and even less [former?] Nazis. Wildly guessing that one half of the German population had been Nazi, not only would every second teacher have been a Nazi or a descendant of Nazis (not to even speak of the civil servants in the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Kultusministerium), at least every other student would have been a descendant of Nazis. (One does not wish to embarrass colleagues and even less superiors. And you just simply cannot give students information that indicates to about half of them that their parents and/or grandparents had been supporters of a criminal regime, if not worse.) So self-chosen amnesia was the way to go. Was it really? You decide.YouÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ll probably say that there were books. Well, I am sure there were, at least about the history of the very early 20th century (i.e. the time of and around WWI), yet books about the Third Reich and the mass murder of Jews (then not yet called the Holocaust) were only written in later years. Regardless of when any related books were written, I never saw any displayed in bookstores or libraries; they must have been hidden on upper or lower shelves. So how about German literature classes in ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“GymnasiumÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•? WouldnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t there, at least, have been some mandatory reading of books related to 20th century history? The answer is a clear ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“noÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. We read Goethe and Schiller and Kleist and Lessing, and the Nibelungs in ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“MittelhochdeutschÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, and ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Pole

PoppenspaelerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• in ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Plattdeutsch (ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“MittelhochdeutschÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“PlattdeutschÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, more or less, being foreign languages), anythingÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •ANYTHING!ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •to avoid contemporary historic or time-critical literature. Only one German teacher recommended casually, on the side, to read ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The Diary of Anne FrankÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, which I (and some of my classmates) did, yet neither was this book mandatory reading, nor was it discussed in class.And now you might say that I could have asked for related books in bookstores and libraries. And I could have, but I didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t because not knowing that any such books existed, it never entered my mind to ask for any such books. Well, maybe I wasnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t very inquisitive in this respect. And this might have been because I didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t grow up with books. During my childhood (= during WWII and the deprived years following the war), there were hardly any books available, and when they became available, they were expensive. Besides, my parents werenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t readers, and my hometown didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t have a library to speak of. LetÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s nor forget: There was no internet, no Goodreads, and no . Knowledge wasnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t as easily to come by as it is today.The above book taught me more about the 20th century than all my years of school and college combined.Fritz Stern is a Jewish historian, who has escaped the Holocaust because his family made it out of Germany in time. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Five Germanys I Have KnownÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• is just as much an insightful chronicle of the 20th century as it is a captivating personal memoir. It also tells a lot about the academic life of a historian, which might not be appealing to everyone. (It wouldnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t be my idea of a dream profession.) I feel unable to give a summary of this book as it is so very comprehensive.I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in European history of the 20th century, provided that he or she doesnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t mind complicated tapeworm sentences, has a more extensive vocabulary than the average ESL reader (namely, I), and last but not least, has better eyes than I have. (Yet there might be an edition with larger print.) If none of these requirements are met, the reader should, at least, be very determined. I was very determined, and I am glad I read this book, even though it took me four months to gnaw through it and, at times, felt more like doing homework than enjoying a leisurely read.P.S. This review will already give you a little training in reading tapeworm sentences. :-)

This is an engaging and personal account of 20th century German History, built around Stern’s own personal experiences and his work as an historian. Born in the city of Breslau, then in Germany but

now in Poland (WrocÃƒâ |Ã â aw), Stern tells of his family and childhood. With the rise of the Nazis, Stern’s physician father lost his job for being a "non-Aryan" and the family was finally able to emigrate to the US when Stern was 14. In his later work as an historian, Stern sought to understand how events in German history had led to the rise of Hitler.The "Five Germanys" of the title are the Weimar Republic from the end of WWI to the rise of Hitler, the Third Reich, the post-WWII "West Germany", and finally the re-united German Federal Republic of today. However, Stern also tells the story of Bismark and the German Empire under the Kaisers. Without that background and the disaster of WWI which put an end to the Empire, it would not be possible to understand the subsequent events.As the story moves beyond WWII, Stern speaks not only as an historian, but also as an observer who knew many of the participants on the East and West sides of the Iron Curtain. He tells of their struggles and their hopes, making them more than just names in a history book.This is the story of a man rediscovering his own native country, learning about the forces which once tore it apart, and those which subsequently brought it back together. One of the most touching stories in the book recounts a visit Stern and his family made to WrocÃƒâ |Ã â aw, the former Breslau, years after WWII, which appears early in the book (part of it is included in the preview). There are many other very personal stories in the book, together with a solid historical perspective. I highly recommend this for anyone interested in Germany history.(This book has also been translated into German, and the German edition is valuable for the originals of some quotations which Stern has translated into English. But since Stern originally chose to write the book in English, that is the version I recommend.)

I have always been intrigued as to how such an educated, cultured nation could support a madman like Adolf Hitler. That is what attracted me to this book. Stern knows Germany. And he explains in detail how National Socialism came to control over Germany in the 1920’s and 30’s. I also enjoyed the writing on the Cold War and unification between West and East Germany. As the other reviewers have stated, this book reads more like a memoir than just studying a period of history. Because of that one gets to know Fritz Stern. His slant on things comes from his political philosophy which is far left. One could even say "socialist". The book covers his many discussions, meetings with leading world figures in Europe and America and he rarely has anything nice to say about anyone who differs from his political sphere. He describes George H.W. Bush as a "denigrator of liberalism" and Reagan as a near moron. As another reviewer commented - I, too, feel he looks at himself as being part of elite group. No common man here, it’s all about the accomplishments of the learned and scholarly. The part dealing with China, South America and India just didn’t fit in this

book. And he deals very lightly with his uncle, Fritz Haber, and his impact upon WWI and II.The prose is easy to read and flows very nicely. I learned a lot about Germany and the German people from reading this book and I'm sure I will go back to parts of it from time to time.

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