

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

GERMANY

IN THE MODERN WORLD

A NEW HISTORY



SAM A. MUSTAFA

Germany in the Modern World

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A New History

Second Edition

Sam A. Mustafa

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For my students



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party organized by—and mostly for—German Catholics, and thus it was regionally strong in Catholic areas but not elsewhere. Words like “liberal” and “Socialist” can be deceptive. For example, Weimar Germany had two liberal parties: the Left-Liberals (German Democratic Party, or DDP), who were definitely not on the left in the sense of Socialism, and the National Liberals, who evolved into the German People’s Party (DVP), a right-wing anti-Weimar party. There were obviously two large “Socialist” parties too, neither of which would have pleased Karl Marx. The Social Democrats (SPD) were the mainstream left-wing party, supported by trade unions and workers, while the National Socialists (Nazis) were of course a far-right movement supported by nationalists but also by working people who were anti-Communist for other reasons. The only true far-left party was the Communists (KPD). Sam Mustafa.	159
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Preface

My pity is too deep, my grief and sympathy are with this unhappy nation, when I think of the exaltation and blind ardour of its uprising, the breaking-out, the breaking-up, the breaking-down.

—Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most history was national history. Scholars wrote the stories of nations almost as if writing biographies. It is hard to imagine today, but most middle- and upper-class European and American families had history textbooks in their homes as general references or coffee-table books, and thus not simply students but educated people in general learned the history of France, or England, or Russia, or Italy. They read, knew, and discussed these histories the way that we today discuss news, politics, or entertainment.

After World War II, scholars began to question the emphasis on history as a story of separate nationalities. After all, is there really something uniquely “Italian” about people living in Italy? Isn’t the creation of the Italian nation-state simply the story of migrations and wars, of customs and religion, of shifting boundaries and politics? Why should historians draw an arbitrary line down a political border? Things like culture and religion, lifestyle and work habits, and even political ideas and social movements don’t necessarily stop at borders. And the creation of a nation-state doesn’t suddenly make all the people within its borders the same. Thus national histories fell out of favor as scholars sought new and original ways to organize the telling of the human past.

But national history never completely went away. In fact, for most American colleges and universities, it is still the normal way to organize undergraduate history courses. The course catalogs of most history departments still offer the traditional British History, French History, Russian History, and so on.

This is a textbook of German history, designed to introduce students and any interested readers to the fascinating, tumultuous, and often tragic story of the largest nationality in Europe. Although our story begins in ancient times, it focuses, as the title suggests, on the modern era: the past three centuries. Along the way we will consider issues of culture, faith, politics, nationality, and race. Although every national story has something to offer on these topics, the way the Germans dealt with them has often had global consequences. Struggles and Big Ideas that began in Germany had a tendency to echo like shock waves around the modern world, sooner or later affecting much of humanity.

Sonderweg: A Special Path?

Shortly after World War II, when most of the world was astonished and horrified by the spectacle of what the Germans had done, scholars groped in vain for some kind of explanation. How could such a sophisticated society, which had produced so much of Europe's great literature, music, and art, have descended into the madness, cruelty, and violence of the Nazi regime? It is a natural human tendency to seek simple, clear answers to immensely complex and confusing questions, and many people after 1945 were looking for a *monocausal* explanation for Germany's catastrophe.

The answer formulated by many historians has come to be known as the Sonderweg thesis. The word *Sonderweg* is German for "special path." The thesis, articulated by historians both inside and outside Germany, was that the Germans had not followed the same path toward modernity that the rest of western Europe had. At some point in their past, the Germans had "detoured" from the path of liberal democracy that countries like England, Holland, France, and others were following, and instead of becoming more free and progressive, Germans followed a uniquely undemocratic and authoritarian path that inevitably led to the Nazis, the war, and the Holocaust.

Historians could not agree on where, exactly, the detour had been. Some suggested that it happened in 1848 when liberal and middle-class Germans failed to create a democratic German republic at the Frankfurt Parliament. Some suggested that it happened when German conservatives led the fight against Napoleon by harnessing ethnic and xenophobic fears and resent-

What Does *Monocausal* Mean?

A monocausal explanation is one in which all the parts of a complicated event or series of events come from a single root cause; for example, “The American Revolution happened because of a dispute over taxes.” Obviously most monocausal explanations are far too simplistic and in many cases not even accurate, and historians usually try to avoid them.

ment. Some went all the way back to Martin Luther to note the famous Protestant leader’s anti-Semitic harangues. But all the Sonderweg historians agreed in principle that the Germans had made fundamental developmental errors that rendered them more susceptible to the sort of dictatorship and genocidal racism embodied by Hitler and the Nazis.

In recent years, most historians have rejected the Sonderweg thesis as being too simplistic, not to mention broadly flawed in its analysis. For one thing, history is not a train on a track. There are no “paths to modernity,” and “modernity” isn’t a destination in any event since it can’t be defined precisely or nailed down in time or place. Nations aren’t vehicles, with all the passengers along for one common ride. More to the point, Germans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were arguably less war-, violence-, and conquest-prone than the British or French, who spent those decades conquering much of the world and ruling native peoples in conditions approaching slave labor. Belgian colonial rule in the Congo resulted in the death of somewhere between 5 and 8 million native people, possibly greater in number than the victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

Nor is it clear that the so-called “special path” included anti-Semitism. Germans were certainly no more anti-Semitic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than the Spaniards or Italians and were arguably much less so than the Poles or Russians. The history of European anti-Semitism gives us no reason to suspect, before the 1930s, that Germany would have been the birthplace of a specifically and murderously anti-Semitic regime.

Finally, any concept of the Germans as abnormally or uniquely preferring authoritarian government over democracy not only calls into question the development of so many German political movements and parties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also forces a comparison of German behavior to that of other European nationalities that were grappling with the same political issues, often in very much the same ways. (The French, arguably one of Europe’s most democratic and republican

peoples, nonetheless created three empires in the course of the nineteenth century, two by coups d'état within France and the third by global conquest and colonization, in each case with broad popular support.) To put it bluntly, most European nations had a lot of blood on their hands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Nonetheless, even if there was no single, clear “special path,” the idea of the *Sonderweg* thesis remains potent for many people. It is of course a *teleological* concept. It is always tempting to search the past for answers to the questions of the present. But there is no single explanation for the crimes, tragedies, and mistakes of German history, any more than there is for any other nation. Nor should we consider any nation's history as simply a path toward any one event, no matter how staggering the event. The Nazi era and the Holocaust remain crucial elements of the German national story, but they are not the end of the story.

What Is *Teleology*?

Although it means different things in different disciplines, for historians teleology is the practice of searching in the past for “why things turned out the way they did” in the present. Historians usually reject it because it assumes two fallacies: (1) that we can all agree on how things have “turned out” in the present when obviously we each have very different understandings of our world; and (2) that there is ever a single cause or chain of causes somewhere in the past that can be traced directly to the present, which is obviously not true.

If German history can't promise you a set of simple, clear explanations for terrible things like the Nazi era, then why study the history of this one nation? Why study any national history at all? I would like to propose a few reasons, addressed by this book.

The Nation and the State

For centuries, European peoples had only vague concepts of nationality. Kings often ruled over people who did not speak the same languages they did. This did not usually trouble rulers, since loyalty to the state was what mattered. In a hereditary monarchy, the state was embodied by the king, his

family, and his immediate subordinates in the ministries. A king didn't want his subjects to think of themselves first as belonging to a nationality, but rather to think of themselves first as *his subjects*.

One of the most important changes in Western history was the merging of the state with the concept of nationality. This had been underway slowly for a long time but it accelerated dramatically in the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. By the end of that period, a new entity existed on the map of Europe: the nation-state.

Having a nation-state meant a new kind of identity and loyalty. A person who lived in a nation-state had the duties of a citizen to the national community, not just to the king. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many European nationalities began to create nation-states, or transformed old state identities into national ones, as subjects became citizens, and loyalty to the state meant loyalty to one's own nationality—or, as they would have said in the nineteenth century, one's race.

The Germans, Europe's largest nationality, were very late in creating a nation-state. The process was fitful and often stumbled on the fact that the German nation seemingly had no center point around which to unify. And when Germans finally did create a nation-state, as a byproduct of a European war, that new entity appeared so large and powerful that it alarmed most of Europe.

Religious Conflict and Identity

People in the English-speaking world do not often consider that Germany has been one of the most important places in the history of Christianity. It was in Germany that the Protestant Reformation began, was defined, and was initially sustained. Germany bore the brunt of the ensuing Wars of Religion. At the height of the Protestant-Catholic conflict in the seventeenth century, Germany became a vast landscape of misery and suffering, a perpetual battlefield. Entire cities were destroyed, entire communities annihilated.

Most of western Europe (and increasingly the New World) felt the impact of these struggles, but no place was as damaged or as divided as Germany. Indeed, a central component of the final peace settlement in 1648 was the religious division of Germany into an astonishingly complex arrangement of hundreds of tiny principalities. The religious divide cut through politics and society in almost every part of the German-speaking lands. It forces us to consider whether any kind of national identity can survive such a fundamental rift.

From Democracy to Dictatorship

German schoolchildren spend a great deal of time in history class studying the fall of democracy and the rise of dictatorship. Their textbooks pass very quickly over much of the national story to focus overwhelmingly upon two periods: the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime. This is a story that fascinates people all over the world.

Many other nationalities have witnessed the decline and collapse of constitutional government and its replacement with dictatorship, but the German case is special, if for no other reason than that we have collectively chosen to make it special. Historian Richard Evans has noted that writing about the Nazis has never been more popular, with an average of three new books on Hitler or the Nazis being published every day for the past decade. For better or worse, the world is fascinated by what happened in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Germany offers one of history's most compelling case studies in the fall of constitutional government and the rise of dictatorship. And along the way, it forces us to consider the fragile nature of democracy and its relationship to nationality, patriotism, and bigotry.

A Window into the Cold War

Germany was one of the few nations physically divided by the Cold War. For decades, more than a million soldiers faced off along the so-called German-German border and in particular at the flash point of divided Berlin. The German experience thus provides us with a view of that conflict like no other Western nation. Germans were the only Europeans on both sides of the Cold War simultaneously, and they developed a unique perspective on the great rivalry between east and west.

The Stepchildren of Western Civilization?

Germany was for centuries a crossroads of European cultural and intellectual achievement. It produced the most prodigiously creative composers and musicians in Europe and did more collectively than any other nationality to create what we now call classical music. Germans were pioneers in philosophy, psychology, physics, chemistry, and engineering. They were probably Europe's most literate population, producers and consumers of literature from periodicals and poetry to novels and stage plays. World-changing ideas like Socialism and psychoanalysis emanated from German thinkers, and for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Germans defined the cutting edge of military science.

And yet history texts rarely associate Germany with the great sociocultural movements of Western civilization . . . except the bad ones. Italians are usually credited with the Renaissance, despite the great impact of German artists and astronomers and of course the German creation of printing presses that enabled Renaissance thought to travel as it did. The French are usually the focus for the Enlightenment, despite that period being the golden age of German music and literature and despite the fact that the most famous essay on the meaning of the Enlightenment was written by a German philosopher. The nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution is usually depicted as a British phenomenon, and the concerns over its ills a British social question, despite the fact that Germany surpassed Britain in industrial output and despite Britain's most famous critics of industrial capitalism being a pair of exiled Germans.

Indeed, most high school and even college students do not learn much about Germany until the history survey course reaches the twentieth century and the rise of fascism. Then textbooks introduce the Germans as the perpetrators of what is usually described as the greatest atrocity in Western history.

This book will not attempt to answer the question of how the people who gave the world Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schiller, Goethe, Kant, Einstein, and Freud also gave the world Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, and the whole dreadful cast of the 1930s and 1940s. That is because the question is pointless. No nationality has a monopoly on genius or brutality, and the presence of one does not mitigate against the presence of the other.

Rather, this book will offer—insofar as a short text can—an appreciation for the rich complexity of the German national story and the German people who wrote it.

A Note on the Second Edition

Since the original publication of this book in 2010, the German story has unfolded in remarkable and unexpected ways. As Europe's largest and wealthiest nationality, now at the center of a unified continent, Germans have been forced to consider new roles and responsibilities that their parents' generation would never have imagined. A nation that is haunted by its still-recent past of aggression and crime has been dragged reluctantly to a position of leadership in the face of several serious crises. Germans have taken the lead, often with great trepidation, in responding to economic, political, and humanitarian disasters across the continent. At the same time, Germany's long alliance with the United States has been sorely tested by mistrust and misunderstanding. The expansion of this text and the addition of a new final chapter are an attempt to address these important issues.



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CHAPTER ONE



Germania

Most nationalities have some sort of foundational myth. It is perhaps even impossible for people to consider their own nationality without conjuring some romanticized version of the past. Often these myths are genesis stories of some kind: explanations of how the nationality came together in this place under a semimythic leader, and often in the face of some great foreign enemy. The degree to which people internalize these stories and take them seriously varies from place to place and time to time. For Germans today, their genesis story (if they even remember it from school) provokes little more than a chuckle. But there was a time, lasting several centuries, when Germans took it very seriously indeed. And it is fitting for us, therefore, to begin with that legend, and to try to pull the roots of history carefully out of the surrounding soil of mythology.

Hermann the German

In the decades before Christ, the Roman Republic was convulsed in civil wars and finally transformed into an autocracy by one man: Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. Augustus ruled an empire that controlled the entire Mediterranean area and western Europe to the Rhine River.

The Rhine is a very large and fast-flowing river, running north from the icy lakes of the Alps. For much of its length it cuts through dramatic hills and mountains whose steep cliffs come right down to the water. As it moves north it gradually broadens and the land becomes flatter. For centuries



The Roman Empire and Germania.

Germans had a romantic attachment to “Father Rhine,” one of the few rivers written in the masculine gender. It certainly is a beautiful and romantic landscape to this day, but the attachment stems also from a mythological source: the idea that the Rhine is the “father” river of the Germanic peoples, the line where the Roman Empire ended and “Germania” began.

In fact, the Romans had already colonized both banks of the river. Many modern German cities, such as Düsseldorf, Cologne, Bonn, Mainz, and Trier, began their existence as Roman outpost towns. Roman settlements in some cases reached seventy miles or more to the east of the Rhine. But for Romans, the Rhine was effectively the frontier region, if not precisely the line of the frontier. Beyond the Rhineland, to the east, lay Magna Germania: greater Germany.

As far as the Romans were concerned, “German” people were a broad collection of northern tribes. They included the Gauls, whom Julius Caesar had conquered a generation earlier and who were now assimilating into the Roman state in present-day France. The Romans knew that Germanic tribes moved around, sometimes in large numbers, and they had an ongoing relationship with several tribes in the frontier region, where trade and migration were tolerated as long as the Roman state and military were not directly threatened. Sometimes German tribes launched raids for plunder inside the

Roman borders, usually resulting in a retaliatory strike by the Romans to wipe out or drive away the offending tribe. But as to the precise number and demography of the Germans, or the extent and cartography of Germania, the Romans could only guess.

A visitor to Germany would be hard-pressed to imagine the country as it must have looked in Roman times. Germany, today so thoroughly populated, developed, and paved, was once an endless, frosty forest, scarcely inhabited in many regions, whose deep woods gave way to occasional sandy bogs and marshes or mountains. Why the Romans ever seriously considered conquering and ruling it is something of a mystery since it was a difficult, cold, and (they thought) unproductive landscape. But in the early days of the Roman Empire, the state was still expansionist by implicit design, and often by explicit assignment.

If later writers like Tacitus are to be believed, the Romans found the Germans to be a fascinating collection of contradictions. Big, hairy, pale-skinned, blue-eyed giants with tremendous physical strength, the Germans were also lazy and prone to sleeping away an entire day because they had been up all night feasting and drinking. They were individually brave warriors who loved a good fight, yet they were disorganized and made poor armies. They were illiterate and came in such a variety of tribes that many couldn't understand each others' languages, although many tribes did apparently have some common words, values, and symbols. The tribes appeared to share many of the same gods and goddesses and religious myths and had imported a fair number of Greco-Roman ones as well. Although some tribes were settled, others were still seminomadic and rarely built any settlement bigger than a town.

The Roman historian Tacitus, writing almost a century after Augustus, made these observations after the Romans had had more than 150 years of contact with Germanic tribes, and yet he still could only guess at the nature of the people beyond the frontier. Nor did he have a clear understanding of the origins of these "German" people: some were from modern-day Scandinavia, others from eastern Europe and Russia, and the ancestors of others had lived there for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. The Romans identified the tribes individually but also referred to them collectively as Germans because they all lived in Germania.

It is also important to note that the frontiers of the Roman empire were certainly not airtight, even during times of peace. There was never a single clear line where "Romans" ended and "Germans" began. In all of the frontier provinces on the Roman side of the border, the people living in those regions were very likely the same ethnicity as the people on the other side. This

was true of all of Rome's frontiers, not just with Germania. The "Roman" soldiers who defended the border in a series of small forts probably spoke the same languages and worshipped many of the same gods as the "German" warriors who might attack them. Meanwhile, the exchange worked in the other direction as well; the proximity of the empire meant that Germanic peoples learned Greco-Roman words, myths, religion, and customs, and often absorbed all of them. Tacitus was not surprised to observe the Germans worshipping Hercules as a god. In other words, a great many Germans were already "Romanized" to one degree or another.

In 16 BCE a coalition of German tribes ambushed a Roman legion and dealt it a serious defeat, capturing the sacred eagle, symbol of the legion and the empire. Augustus authorized a plan of gradual invasion and colonization. The Romans courted alliances with some Germanic tribes while building up armies to crush others. Augustus appointed his stepsons Drusus and Tiberius to command the conquest. Their record was mixed. Roman forces did advance deeper into Germania than they ever had before, but actual control of the region proved elusive. Drusus died on campaign and Tiberius was forced to leave in 6 CE to put down a rebellion in another region. That left command of the campaign to Publius Quinctilius Varus.

Varus was a controversial commander, and negative opinions from his colleagues and subordinates indicate a lack of trust in his honesty or competence. That may well be after-the-fact rationalizing, given what was about to happen. Varus had a sizable force at his disposal: three legions (about fifteen thousand professional soldiers), plus perhaps another fifteen thousand auxiliary soldiers and supporting units. Although he was aware that launching this large army headlong into the uncharted wilderness of Germania was a risky venture, Varus believed that he had sufficient local support from loyal and/or Romanized tribes, particularly the services of a young man whose advice he trusted completely: a chieftain from the Cherusci tribe whose Latinized name was Arminius, and who has been remembered in German as Hermann.

Arminius was twenty-six years old when Varus entrusted him with the crucial role of organizing local support for the campaign. The Romans had every reason to trust him. Arminius and his brother had been taken hostage during an earlier Roman pacification campaign and "Romanized." This was a common practice in regions that the Romans wanted to assimilate: re-educating the children of local chieftains and aristocracy as Romans. Thus Arminius spoke and read Latin and spent years in Roman military service. He was even granted the title of an equestrian (the lower rank of the Roman nobility). At some point in 7 or 8 CE he returned to Germania to marry a young woman of the Cherusci tribe, whereupon he became not

Arminius? Or Hermann?

The name “Hermann” became attached to him during the Renaissance when the story became widely popular, but his Germanic name was probably something like “Irmin” or “Irminus,” perhaps indicating a different tribal origin than the Cherusci. Given that most educated people—on both sides of the frontier—used Latin, or at least many Latin words, it is likely that he was “Arminius” for his whole life, even when speaking to other Germans.

only a recognized chieftain in his own right, but also a diplomat between the Roman and Germanic worlds.

Unfortunately for Varus, however, Arminius had for at least a year been in the process of assembling a coalition of Germanic tribes specifically to oppose the Romans. He had made peace among six of the larger tribes, as well as getting agreements from perhaps hundreds of little villages and settlements in the region, all of whom pledged to contribute warriors for a campaign. How he kept all of this a secret remains a mystery, but he must have been very persuasive. His motivations are also somewhat mysterious. Some writers believe he had specific grievances against the Romans, others that his complaints were against Varus personally, and others that he may have wished simply to advance himself as a regional warlord and then deal with the Romans on his own terms.

In the summer of 9 CE, Varus’s army was already well east of the Rhine, and he believed that he had pacified a large area of Magna Germania. What he had actually done was march his men into a gigantic trap. Arminius left him, allegedly to confer with Germanic tribal chiefs, but in reality to raise his army. Varus pressed on confidently, allowing the Roman forces to stretch out in a column almost ten miles long. In this unwieldy formation, and in the midst of densely forested, unfamiliar terrain, the formidable fighting power of the legions was drastically reduced.

It must have been a dreadful campaign for the Roman soldiers as evidence mounted that they had been abandoned, and little skirmishes with unfriendly locals indicated that the countryside was not pacified after all. Most alarming to Varus must have been the desertion of many of his *auxilia* (militia) troops, who were local tribesmen themselves and who now appeared on the opposite side. Finally, on September 9 the Roman advanced guard was stopped by a blocking force of Germanic warriors then ambushed from the marshes and forests as they tried to deploy.

The event has ever after been known as the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest (in German, *der Teutoburgerwald*), although “massacre” is more accurate than “battle.” The fighting on the first day probably only lasted an hour or two, during which more than half of the Roman soldiers were killed, captured, or wounded. Groups of Romans fought on for another two days before they were finally overwhelmed. Varus committed suicide. Handfuls of dazed survivors emerged in small groups later that autumn, spreading word of the worst Roman military defeat in living memory.

According to legend (probably embellished by the Roman historian Suetonius), the normally stoic Augustus suffered a rare loss of composure when a messenger brought him the news. He went pale then tore at his hair and clothes in anguish, howling, “Quinctilius Varus, give me back my legions!” True or not, we know that he lost his enthusiasm for the conquest of Germania.

And thus we have the genesis story of the German people. The barbarian leader Arminius—Hermann—united the Germanic tribes against the mighty invader from the west. The arrogant Romans advanced deep into the primeval forests of Germany, only to be ambushed and massacred. And the Roman emperor declared that there would be no more attempts to conquer them. The Rhine would be the border. The Holy Rhine, Father Rhine, guarded the German people from conquest and assimilation into the Roman Empire. Thus the Germans evolved pure and strong, their language and written script preserved and evolving as a uniquely German thing, not absorbed into Latin; and their race remained distinctly different: they were tall, blond, and blue-eyed, in contrast with those small, dark, swarthy Latins of the south and west.

That’s the legend. Like all good legends, it has grown around a skeleton of documentable fact. But of course like all creation myths, it is a better story than history.

For one thing, the Romans weren’t done with Germania in 9 CE. Five years after the disaster, the new emperor Tiberius ordered his nephew Claudius Drusus (known, ironically, as “Germanicus” because of his father’s victories over the Germans in a previous war) to lead a punitive invasion. By this time one-third of Rome’s mobile army was deployed on the Rhine. This was a huge operation, more than twice the size of Varus’s expedition, and it moved into central Germania, supposedly assisted by Arminius’s own brother, who was still loyal to the Romans. Germanicus devastated several Germanic war bands, but Tiberius ultimately called off the operation as too costly. Nonetheless, the Romans considered it a success, and Germanicus received a triumph in Rome. Thus it was Tiberius, not Augustus, who gave up on a conquest of Germany, and not because of the defeat at the Teutoburgerwald.



The mountains and Rhine Valley, south of Koblenz.

Second, there was nothing “pure” about the Germanic tribes, and in fact there was very little “German” about them, if we use that term to mean the direct ancestors of the modern German people. The Roman Empire was already an immense and complex polyglot society by the time of Augustus and only became more so with the following centuries. Germanic peoples came and went across the Roman frontiers in both peace and war, mixing with Romans (who could have been from Spain, Africa, Turkey, Macedonia, Syria, or any number of places) in endless combinations. Germanic peoples adopted Latin words into their languages even before Arminius, and certainly did so after him. And while the German language did evolve its own unique script, it was nonetheless based upon Latin letters. By the time of Rome’s disintegration, as we shall see, Germans and Romans had so thoroughly mixed in the frontier regions, as well as throughout the Western Empire, that it was almost impossible to distinguish them except at the highest ranks of nobility. When the empire became Christian early in the fourth century, Germans increasingly took Latinized names, making any attempt to separate their ancestry even more difficult.

Third, the people the Romans called “Germans” were only the current inhabitants of a land that had been populated before Rome even existed.