INTRODUCING GERMANY

Background Information

Before this unit, the teacher may wish to share the following information about Germany with students.

The ancient Romans used the name "Germani" for all of the tribes that spoke Germanic languages or dialects. This is where the English word "German" comes from. "Deutsch", which is what the Germans call themselves, comes from the root word "thiot", which means "the people". When the Romans ruled the western world, they built fortress towns for their military. That is why you can see remnants of Roman buildings today in cities like Augsburg, Regensburg, Trier, Bonn and Cologne.

During the Middle Ages, Germany was a patchwork of small states ruled by kings, princes and dukes. Their rulers built the castles that can still be found all over Germany, especially along the Rhine and Saale rivers. The common people lived in villages that were built outside the castle walls; they were poor peasants who did not own land and had no rights. Also, there were towns that were built into flourishing cities by their citizens, who were merchants, craftspeople, artisans and trades people. In the 19th century, Germany was industrialized and became a single country.

For a long time, there was one Germany, but this changed after World War II ended in 1945. Germany had begun this war and then was defeated and occupied by the United States, Britain, France and the then Soviet Union. A few years later, disagreements between the Soviet Union and the other three countries led to the division of Germany into an eastern part (the German Democratic Republic [GDR]) and the western part (Federal Republic of Germany [FRG]).

A border ran through the two parts. The city of Berlin was divided too, and the government of East Germany put up a wall through the middle of the city in 1961. The people living in the east were not allowed to travel to the west. Many families and friends were separated.

In 1989, tens of thousands of GDR citizens fled to the Federal Republic through other countries. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was opened. Almost one year later, on October 3, 1990, East Germany joined West Germany to become one country. The two parts of Berlin were also united. There are many challenges involved in integrating two very different political, economic and educational systems, but most Germans are happy that they can be one country again.

While the country was divided, the Federal Republic's seat of government was located in Bonn, a small town on the Rhine river, and the German Democratic Republic was governed from East Berlin. Now, that Germany is