

Conversation Notes

The study of Germany within the European Union is crucial for social studies classes in U.S. schools for at least ten good reasons (although almost any one of them will do by itself).

1. Germany Is a Prime Mover in European Integration

West Germany has been a prime mover and promoter of European Community in 1957. When the train of European unity was threatened with derailment, the now-united Germany got back on track. The new Germany favors a Europe of diverse identities and traditions, a “cathedral with many chapels”. Its neighbors and partners agree with the strategy of having a European Germany, not a German Europe, emerge from the end of the cold war and German unification.

2. The Land of the Middle

Germany is located at the very center of the continent of Europe. It is the country with the greatest number of neighbors; altogether nine: Poland and the Czech Republic to the east and southeast, Austria and Switzerland to the south, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands to the west, and Denmark to the north. All except Switzerland are currently members of the European Union, Austria and Switzerland, are predominantly German speaking. Poland and the Czech Republic, are former Communist countries with a long tradition of cross-fertilization with German culture.

3. A Vulnerable Economic Giant

Germany is the largest economy in Europe and, in proportion to its size and population, the leading export nation in the world. The United States, a country that is twenty-six times larger than Germany by land area, and Japan both export less by value. Like Japan, though, Germany is highly dependent on other countries for raw materials, energy, and a good portion of its highly skilled labor force.

4. A Model for Reconstruction and Cold War Conflict Management

Germany’s recovery, after total defeat and destruction in World War II, is exemplary and a thought-provoking case study by itself or in comparison to Japan, a country allied to Germany during the war that was defeated and later reconstructed with the intervention of the United States. Both countries rose from ashes to become the principal U.S. competitors.

Germany, furthermore, has been the frontier country during the cold war, a symbol of the division of the world and of Europe, epitomized by the Berlin Wall (1961–89) and of the Western resolve to withstand Soviet Russia’s expansion. The Berlin Airlift of 1948–49, conducted by the U.S. Air Force after a Soviet blockade of the city, as well as the stationing of hundreds of thousands of U.S. and NATO troops at the continental divide on German soil for the past fifty years, have united people in Germany and the United States in a common pursuit of their foreign and security policies.

5. A Model for Emerging Nations and for Europe

Uniting two halves of a country that had been forcefully kept apart for more than forty years is a rare political, social, economic, and cultural experiment. Other still-divided nations (such as China, Korea and Cyprus) as well as those now emerging out of the breakdown of former empires and multiethnic states that have to reshuffle in mixes other than their prior compositions, are concerned observers of the German unification process. Will it be possible to let “grow together what belongs together” (in the words of former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt) in one generation’s lifetime? How will Germany handle its dual legacy of totalitarian episodes, one fascist, one communist? Will Germany’s new muscle evoke old fears of a hegemonic threat to Europe or even the world? Most importantly, German unification – its speed, cost, and rate of success – will teach us something about the prognosis of European unification.

6. Germany's Cultural Legacy to Europe and the United States

To study major cultural development of Europe and the United States, it is not enough to look to British and French traditions, as is often done in schools in the United States. Significant contributions to our understanding of the world, to the arts and music, to science and technology, have their origins in the German-speaking countries.

Famous Germans who excelled in their respective disciplines and who deserve further investigation in the context of a number of subject matters and school activities include: philosophers (Immanuel Kant, Georg W. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers); the Protestant theologian and reformer Martin Luther; classical poets and dramatists (Gotthold Lessing, Johann W. Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, Joseph von Eichendorff, Theodor Fontane, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Franz Kafka, Erich Kästner, Bertolt Brecht); Nobel Prize for literature recipients (Gerhard Hauptmann, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass); musicians (Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Händel, Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss); painters (Albrecht Dürer, Caspar David Friedrich, Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz); architects (Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Werner Gropius); mathematicians (Gottlob Frege, Carl Friedrich Gauss); scientists (Robert Koch, Rudolf Virchow, Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, Albert Einstein, Lise Meitner, Werner K. Heisenberg); engineers (Gottlieb Daimler, Ferdinand Porsche and Werner von Braun); and film directors (Wilhelm Murnau, Leni Riefenstahl, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Tom Tykwer).

7. The Country of Origin of Many U.S. Citizens

Germany is the country of origin of many U.S. citizens. The first Germans were craftsmen who arrived in 1608 at Jamestown, Virginia. They were the forerunners of 8 million immigrants from German-speaking countries or regions. Germany's 1930s "brain-drain" of 100,000 intellectuals and artists, many of them Jewish, who fled Hitler's dictatorship, also greatly enriched U.S. culture.

Germans significantly influenced U.S. culture, especially in preschool (kindergarten) and higher education (primarily through the forced exile of German-Jewish academicians during the 1930's who found a new home at universities and colleges in the United States). Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, was founded in 1876 on the model of a German research university, Humboldt University of Berlin. Today, approximately one-fourth of all U.S. citizens trace their ancestry, at least partially, to German roots.

8. A Multicultural Society

The United States and Canada have been called classical immigration countries. They have championed, with pride, their respective melting-pot and mosaic models and heritages of assimilation and acculturation of immigrants. Officially, Germany until recently has been a "non-immigration" country, with a largely homogeneous society and compatibly diverse cultural traditions.

Inquiring into the validity of these traditional assumptions is appropriate for kindling student interest. Rising problems with increasing, and increasingly fragmented, alien minorities in both the United States and Germany will lead to useful comparisons that will help students understand the origins of prejudice, hate and xenophobia, as well as the unavoidability of cultural exchange.

9. A Case Study for Overcoming Stereotypes

Unmasking stereotypes is a crucial step toward international understanding. The images of Germany in the United States and, conversely, of the United States in Germany lend themselves to a study of stereotypes and their origins because Germany and the United States have been linked in many ways over the past 220

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years. Immigration, travelogues, and tourism in one direction, and occupation, more tourism, and decade of Hollywood films and television series in the other, have created stereotypical images of the two countries in their respective populations.

10. A Mystery or a Country Like Any Other?

Germany has freely offered the world its people and its artistic and scientific genius. The country has also been at the source of devastating war and unparalleled genocide. It is a case study in contrast and contradictions, in confrontation and reconciliation, in nationalistic isolation and international cooperation.

Germany today means Goethe and Goebbels, Hitler and Hölderlin, Eichmann and Einstein. Germany produced the rockets that destroyed part of London and Coventry and “the ultimate driving machines”. It built the Berlin Wall and tore down the Iron Curtain and the borders between the countries of Western Europe. Its long history is checkered and still not very well understood, but for more than half a century the Federal Republic has been a model of stability and peaceful coexistence.

*** Note:** From a television interview with former Chancellor Willy Brandt at the opening of the Brandenburg Gate on November 9, 1989.

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