Context

In 1945, at the close of the Second World War, the National-Socialist dictatorship in Germany collapsed. As Europe rebuilt itself in the next decade with the world's assistance, Germany was split in two: West Germany became a non-Communist state, while a Communist party ruled East Germany. A Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union divided the German nations and the world. The two German states existed next to each other but against one another politically and economically. East German children grew up in a country quite different from their West German neighbors.

Throughout the 1950s, a booming West German economy and East German protests against a political dictatorship and planned socialist economy prompted thousands to move west. By the end of the decade, flight from East into West Germany was made a crime. The capital city of Berlin, while situated geographically in East Germany, mirrored the split between East and West. The split was made visible with the construction by the East German government of a physical and symbolic barrier, the Berlin Wall, through the heart of Berlin in 1961.

German unification was forged over time by a changing world order and Germany's post-war reconciliation with its one-time foes. During the 1980s, political overtures by German leaders from both sides, fewer travel restrictions on East Germans, and a weakened East German economy made peaceful mass demonstrations for freedom possible by the end of the decade. On November 9, 1989, East Germany officially opened its borders to West Germany and West Berlin. German citizens no longer had to designate which part of Germany was home.

The political system of a unified Germany is laid out in the 1949 Constitution, the Grundgesetz or Basic Law. The Basic Law emphasizes the protection of individual liberty, clearly defining the human rights protected by this Constitution. It divides power between the federal and state levels and between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. Since the United States is also guided by a Constitution, it may be easier to understand the structure of the German government by relating some of the key concepts from American government.

First, Germany is a **federation**, or a number of partially self-governing states or regions united by a central government. This can be compared to the United States with a central government uniting partially self-governing states.

Second, Germany has a **parliamentary system of government**. This system of government cannot be directly compared to the United States. For one thing, there is no clear-cut separation of power between the executive and legislative branches of government. In addition, in a parliamentary system of government the head of government is not the President, but the Chancellor who is also a member of parliament. The German Federal President is the head of state, but has less power than the United States President. So for this reason, the executive branch of government is much more dependent on the legislative branch of government for support. Germany's legislative body does have two houses like the United States. The Bundestag is directly elected by the people like the U.S. House of Representatives; the Bundesrat represents the state governments. The German judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislative branches of government.

Finally, **political parties** operate differently in Germany. The United States basically has a two party system. Germany has a multi-party system.

It is also important to realize that Germany had to restructure its political institutions after the Second World War to reflect its commitment to political freedom for all of its citizens. Germany has taken this opportunity to redefine itself and to take on a leadership role both in the European Union and in the world at large.

Focus Questions

1. Why was Germany unified after years divided?
2. What is the structure of Germany's government?
3. How does the German government promote political freedom?