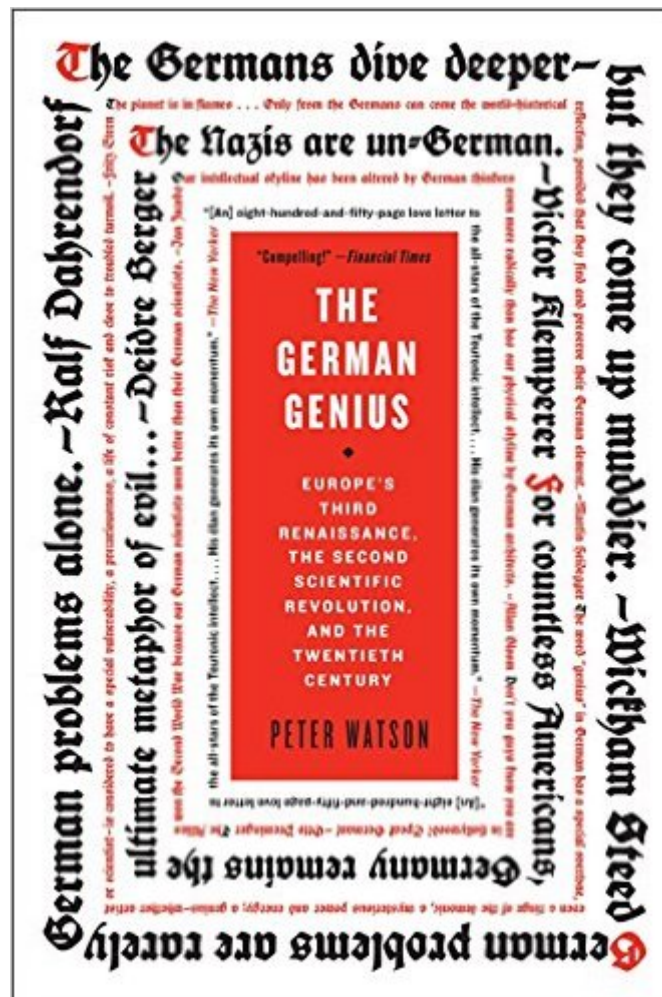


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The German Genius: Europe's Third Renaissance, The Second Scientific Revolution, And The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

The German Genius is a virtuoso cultural history of German ideas and influence, from 1750 to the present day, by acclaimed historian Peter Watson (Making of the Modern Mind, Ideas). From Bach, Goethe, and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein, from the arts and humanities to science and philosophy, The German Genius is a lively and accessible review of over 250 years of German intellectual history. In the process, it explains the devastating effects of World War II, which transformed a vibrant and brilliantly artistic culture into a vehicle of warfare and destruction, and it shows how the German culture advanced in the war's aftermath.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book is intended as a history of German ideas over the last 250 years or so, and specifically not a political, economic, or comprehensive "national" history of Germany. The narrative begins near the end of Bach's life (1685-1750), well prior to a German nation having been achieved (1871), and continues beyond the events of 1989 and the subsequent re-unification of what we recall as East and West Germany. The book considers German ideas as being those of German people, which exceeds the bounds of citizenship in any German nation but instead also includes people of German cultural background from Austria, Bohemia, Moravia and other territories where German-speaking peoples lived en masse. A reader may no doubt quibble with some of the persons who are included as being "German" by the author, but a disagreement over any one person is indeed a quibble, not an indictment of the underlying premise. The book would seem to

have at least three purposes:1) By documenting the immense fertility of German culture in generating powerful advances in the arts, science and the humanities the author attempts to restore (for those for whom it is needed) a wider, more balanced perspective on Germany than apparently currently exists. Without any attempt to minimize, dismiss, or overlook the evil of the Nazi's and the Holocaust (for which "Germany" has been stigmatized), the narrative offers a reminder of great achievements that were not accidental, but a product of German culture and society.2) By explaining the elements of German culture that gave rise to those fertile developments, an explanation is also proposed for reasons that some of those same elements could ironically allow or make possible the barbaric (and distinctly uncultured) Third Reich.

Oh please, with peace to the previous reviewer. Here's my problem with the review. When one says that they are rather ignorant of German culture and history and then goes on to myopically focus in on the Nazi era and holocaust as if it were the sum of German history, I have to wonder if they had learned anything constructive from Watson's excellent survey at all. It is as if Anglos are perpetually in the grip of wartime propaganda some 70 years after the war. Actually, the propaganda really goes back to WWI in which the UK launched the first modern state propaganda campaign against another people, using race imagery btw. Watson's book is an attempt at a corrective to this distorted and one sided view of history, and it should be applauded in so far as it succeeds. Unfortunately, based on the previous review, I wonder if he has. Although I'm of Anglo ancestry, I have lived in Germany and speak German with intermediate ability. It is a wonderful country and people, and being a classical musician, I can say that their achievement in that sphere is unparalleled in the history of mankind. The most we Anglos can muster seems to be the Beatles and other such low rent music (Elgar, who spent summers in Bavaria, excepted). What does that compare with Mozart or Bach? What galls me in such thinking is the presumptuous, arrogant and glib superiority complex that Anglos have about themselves. We view ourselves as the world's angels, forgetting the international slave trade (which Germans had nothing to do with), the creation of concentration camps (for Boers in S.A. during the Boer War), the wholesale extermination of various native tribes in North America, and host of other crimes against humanity.

Irony struggles with world history in this recent Financial Times headline "Germany told to act to save Europe." Times have changed since 1945. We missed something along the way in all our readings and movies. Convenient villains for so long, the Germans are now asked to play savior. It is time to pull aside the historical blinders of World War Two, its atrocities and aftermath and open

our eyes to Germany's contributions to science, philosophy, music, modern thought and their effect on our twenty first centuries sensibilities. Peter Watson's massive survey book reacquaints the reader, if "reacquainting" is the right verb, to the Germanic phenomenon with his deep research and cultural sensitivity without leaving unaddressed the twelve years of Nazi rule. Reading it is a sumptuous feast on Germanic erudition, philosophical thought and achievement by an author with a keen eye for detail and a gift for synthesis. To paraphrase Philip Larkin, this is a serious book on serious ground; not to be consumed in one or two sittings; its complexities and intricacies are many, inviting the reader to carefully ponder the roots of Western philosophical thought, the wellsprings of nineteenth century symphonic music (mostly Germanic), the scope of Western artistic achievement, the nature of politics and political dialogue in our modern society and the engines of science in the past two hundred years.

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