

Why learn German? Answers since 1600*

By ALL

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Four hundred years ago, virtually no one in Britain wanted to learn German. Yet 250 years later, in 1858, German was introduced alongside French as one of the two main “modern languages” examined in the newly introduced School Certificate examinations offered by Oxford and Cambridge universities, and it held on to that pre-eminent place right up until the late 20th century, when Spanish caught up; and then overtook German in the early 21st century. How did German earn its position, and can it keep it?

Just under 400 years ago, John Minsheu’s *Guide into Tongues* (1617), a kind of polyglot dictionary, was the first work in English that claimed to help an English speaker trying to learn German – before that, the tiny number who were interested (Reformation scholars, for example) had two options: go to Germany and “pick it up”, or open a German book, find a Latin-German dictionary and start reading. The first German grammar written in English was published in 1680 by a German scholar working at Cambridge University, Martin Aedler. (The first grammars of German in *any* language had only been written in the 1570s – before that, it had not occurred to anyone that German was worth the attention that Latin deserved). Aedler promoted *High Dutch*, as Aedler called German (by contrast with Low Dutch, i.e. Netherlandish) as *The most Copious and Significant, Majestick and Sweet, Perfect and Pure, Easie and Usefull, Antient and Universal Toung*. He hoped his book, available at inns near the docks, would sell to travellers bound for the continent. Unfortunately, this promising business model did not pay off, and as Aedler had in effect bankrupted himself to pay for printing the grammar, he was forced to marry an elderly widow to whom he was in debt. The marriage was not a happy one; Aedler died alone and in poverty at the age of 81 – not an auspicious start to the history of learning German in England. And yet Aedler’s grammar was a landmark, bang up to date with the very latest grammatical insights from 17th-century linguistic theory. For example, his analysis of German compound words like *blutdürstig* ‘blood-thirsty’, borrowed from the great German grammarian Justus-Georg Schottelius, is essentially the same as that still taught in universities today. When Sir Isaac Newton died (1643-1727), his library contained only *one* book in German, but it was Aedler’s *High Dutch Minerva*.

Is *London* bigger then *Paris*? Ist *London* größer als *Paris*?

It is longer a great deal. Es ist viel länger.
Is *England* a wholesome Country? Ist *Engelland* ein gesundes Land?

Not very wholesome; It is too moist, and the Air is somewhat Foggy, because the Sea surrounds it. Nicht sehr gesund; es ist zu feucht, und ein nebelichter Luft darin, wegen des Meers, so das Land umringt.

I believe the Scurvy is very common there. Ich glaub der Scharbock ist sehr gemein da.

So it is, for they feed much there upon Meat, and use not much exercise; and besides, the Air contributes to it. Das ist wahr; dann sie essen zu viel Fleisch, und haben nicht viel bewegung, und darzu komit es auch viel vom Luft.

Do they divert themselves well in *England*? Hat man große Lust und zeit-vertrieb in *Engelland*?

Very well. Sehr große.
There's Tennis, Bowling, Nine-pins, Billiards, Tables, Cards, and Dice. Es seind alda Ballhaus, Kugel-plätze, Kegel-spiel, Bischen-taffel-spiel, Wret-spiel, Karten, und Würfel-spiel.

There are Stage-plays, Bear, and Bulls-baiting, Cock fightings, wrastling, Racing, &c. Es seind alda scharspiel, Behen und Ochsen Hetzen, Bahnen Kämpfen, Ringen, Renbahn in die Wettlauffen.

There

There are others, that fight for Prizes with all manner of Weapons. Man hat dat etliche, so für einen gewissen preist sechten, mit allerhand waffen.

How many fine Cities have you in *England*? Wie viel schöne Städte seind in *Engelland*?

Twenty five, and six hundred forty one great Market Towns; and there are nine thousand, seven hundred and twenty five Parishes. Fünf und zwanzig, und sechs hundert, ein und viertzig Große markt stetten; da seind benebens neun-tausent sieben hundert und fünf und zwanzig Pfar-Kirchen.

Are Strangers much esteemed in *England*? Werden die fremdden viel geachtet in *Engelland*?

Not very much of the Rabble, they take every Stranger for a Frenchman. Nicht viel vom gemeinen Volk, sie sehen alle fremdde für Franzosen an.

Who convenes the Parliament? Wer beruft das Parliament?

The King, and he adjourns, Prorogues, removes, and dissolves it, of his meer will and pleasure. Der König, und er setzt ihm einen gewis-sen Tag, verlengert es und bicht es wieder-um auf nach sein wol-gefallen.

Has the King a fine Court? Hat der König eine schöne Hofhaltung?

There's no question; Gards on Horse-back, Grenadiers and Foot-Soldiers, well entertained. Dazan ist kein zweif-fel, Weiß-guardp, Grenadierer, und Kriegs-soldiers, well entertained knechte zu fus wol and

Only a few years later, a certain Heinrich Offelen had more luck with his *Double Grammar for Germans to learn English and for Englishmen to Learn the GERMAN-tongue* (1687) (See above). Unlike Aedler's scholarly grammar, Offelen's book followed the usual practice in such works of printing model dialogues in parallel in German and English as the main didactic tool – a habit nowadays all but defunct except in the humblest phrase-books. The dialogue shown in Illustration 1 also imparts some cultural knowledge: England is “not very wholesome; It is too moist, and the Air is somewhat Foggy, because the Sea surrounds it”; scurvy is common because “they feed much there upon Meat, and use not much Exercise”. On the upside, pastimes include ninepins, billiards, dice, stage plays, bull-baiting, cock-fighting, wrestling and racing. (Sport is, from my observation, virtually a universal topic in textbooks of German from Offelen onwards.)

Kaufmannsbrie fe.

Erster Brief.

An einen Kaufmann in Amsterdam.

London den — May, 17 —

Hochgeehrtester Herr,

Dero angenehmes vom 29sten passato habe zu recht erhalten, und daraus ersehen, daß E. E. die Leinwand, so ich neulich ordinirte, in 4. Kisten, mit Schiffer Gutwind verladen. Ich hoffe, daß das Schiff bald absegeln werde. Was Dero Frage anlanget, wegen des Indigo, so ist ein Unterschied in den Sorten zu machen. Die beste Sorte bleibt allezeit die beste, und ist in höhern Preis, als die geringen Sorten. Ich kann nicht ganz genau bestimmen, wie hoch der Centner kommen würde, weil ich selbst in diesem Artikel nicht handle. Daferne aber E. E. eine Commission aufzugeben belieben, so werde ich im Einkauf mein möglichstes thun, E. E. gute Waare, so wohlfeil, als möglich, zu verschaffen. Indessen habe die Ehre mit aller Hochachtung zu verharren,

E. E. D. W. D.

Daniel Handelsmann.

MERCHANTS LETTERS.

Letter I.

To a Merchant in Amsterdam.

London the — May, 17 —

Sir,

Your Favour of the 29th past have I duly received, and therefrom seen, that You the Linnen, which I lately ordered, in 4. Chests, with Captain *Goodwind*, shipped. I hope that the Ship soon sail will.

What Your Question concerns, about the Indico, (so) is a Difference in the Sorts to make. The best Sort remains always the best, and is in a higher Price than the bad Sorts. I cannot quite exactly determine, how high the Cwt. come would, because I myself in this Article not deal. But if You a Commission to give please, (so) shall I in the Purchase my utmost do, You good Goods, so cheap as possible to procure. In the mean Time have I the Honour with all Esteem to remain,

Sir,

Your humble Servant,
Daniel Merchant.

From 1700, the number of German textbooks increased steadily. Whereas poor Aedler couldn't sell his books for love nor money, now one or two textbooks even ran to a second edition or third edition. Some catered specifically for the evidently growing "German for business" market. Bachmair included sample business correspondence, for example (see Illustration 2 above). But German's social prestige was also growing, helped by the fact that George I had taken the throne in 1714, so that the German House of Hanover now ruled in England. German was also valuable to the new class of young nobleman (and some women) setting off on their "Grand Tour" of Europe, who needed not just survival language skills, but also to master the art of socially refined small-talk in German – a fine example of making polite conversation about the weather is can be seen in Illustration 3 below.

Who has told you that Story?

With your Permission! it is very false.

They say so every where.

Who must have spread this News abroad?

They are disaffected People.

You may believe of it what you please.

The III. Dialogue.

What Weather is it to Day?
It is the finest Weather in the World.

The Sun shines.

Is it windy abroad?

No! it is very calm Weather.

It will be very hot then this afternoon.

I believe so; for the Sun is at the highest now.

I am afraid we shall have a Storm.

It doth not look so.

I beg your Pardon; look those Clouds!

Well, what signifies that?

That signifies Thunder.

I doubt at least it will rain.

Do you observe, how it lightens.

Yes, it frightens me.

What are you afraid?

I am afraid of the Thunder-Clapp.

They say it did freeze: this Night.

Is it possible?

Wer hat euch die Lügen vorge-
schwätzt?

Das ist Augenscheinlich falsch;
mit eurer Erlaubnuß.

Man sagt allenthalben

Wer muß dieses Gerüchte aus-
gestreuet haben?

Es sind übelgefennete Leute?

Ihr mögt davon glauben was
euch beliebt.

Das III. Gespräche.

Was ist heute für Wetter?

Es ist das aller schönste Wet-
ter von der Welt.

Die Sonne scheint.

Ist es windig?

Nein, es ist ein sehr stilles Wet-
ter. Es ist sehr stille.

So wird es Nachmittag sehr
warm werden.

Ich glaube es, dann die Sonne ist
am höchsten nun.

Ich fürchte wir mögten ein Un-
gewitter haben

Es siehet nicht darnach aus;

Verzeihet mir; sehet ihr dieses
Gewölck?

Nun gut, was hat das zu sagen.
Das bedeut Donner.

Zum wenigsten glaube ich es
wird regnen.

Werdet ihr gewahr, daß es
Wetter leuchtet.

Ja das ärgert mich.

Was befürchtet ihr?

Ich fürchte den Donner-Schlag.

Man sagt es habe diese Nacht
gefrohren.

Wär dies wohl möglich?

Ich

Equally important, though, was the gradual discovery of recent German literature, which was now enjoying a golden age. Gebhard Wendeborn (1742-1811), Minister for the German chapel on Ludgate Hill, was the first to praise German as a language of literature and culture, commenting in the preface to his *Elements of German grammar* (1774) that "[T]he Germans have lately made great improvements, both in their language and their manner of writing". Even the French were now taking an interest in German literature, and the English would no doubt follow suit:

The French, who in general are thought to be rather partial to their own productions, have lately begun to study the German language, and to think favourably of German literature; against which they formerly entertained great prejudices. Among the English the German has been hitherto very little known; but there is reason to expect, that

within a few years, even in this country, so famous for the improvement and patronage of the arts and sciences, the language and the literature of the Germans will no more be looked upon with indifference.

(Wendeborn 1774: viii)

Wendeborn and one or two other textbook authors gave long lists of recommendations of German books, both literary and scholarly, including names now less well-known to non-specialists (moral philosopher and novelist Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, poet and author Gottfried August Bürger) as well as many still very famous ones: Goethe (then aged 48) and Schiller (aged 38) were both new additions to Wendeborn's list when he updated it in 1797. More and more textbook authors also included selections of German literature for reading practice.

By the late 18th century, then, learning German was evidently both of practical use and newly socially prestigious. Now, at the end of that century, learning German also began to be presented as excellent mental training – a view that had its roots in Humboldt's reform of the Prussian education system, in which he accorded special importance to the learning of languages in developing mental rigour. Now we see the first appearance of "exercises" to train young minds in mastering the details of grammar. The earliest example in Europe of these grammars-and-exercises, known as "practical" grammars, was Johann Valentin Meidinger's *Practische Französische Grammatik* (1783), and authors of works for English pupils learning German soon followed. The first attempts were not, by today's pedagogical standards, wholly successful. Take, for example, Wendeborn's exercise on the definite article, the very first topic of the grammar, in which pupils were expected to translate:

The cunning fox, that killed the hen of the poor woman, who sold the eggs to the wife of the butcher, has been seen near the cottage, which is not far from the meadow, where the cows and the sheep of the farmer are grazing.

This admirable sentence achieved Wendeborn's stated aim, which was "to combine, in each line of an Exercise, as many words as could be well joined, to elucidate the particular rules for which they were intended [...]" – but it also contained an array of complexities of German word order and case (e.g. case after prepositions) that were completely uncharted territory to the learners, who had, after all, only reached page 6 of their grammar. Nevertheless, for all its shortcomings, the practical grammar gave birth to the idea of building in to the textbook opportunities for the learner to practise and apply what they were taught – and that fundamental innovation is one which has stood the test of time.

The first formal school examinations for German were set in the 1850s. Both Oxford and Cambridge introduced School Certificate Examinations in 1858 as a qualification for pupils not expecting to progress to university, and both included French and German from the outset. Illustration 4 shows the first page of the Translation paper for German Seniors (A-level equivalent) – my university students tend to balk at the difficulty of the passage for translation into German, and one might indeed be tempted to mourn the passing of the high standard of the "good old days", were it not for the evidence of the examiners' reports, which tell us that whatever the standard set, the majority of pupils fell far short of it. The lament of the examiner in 1878 is typical: "The translations from English into German were in general very disappointing, showing in many cases an entire ignorance of the commonest rules and of the structure of the simplest sentences".

The focus of these school examinations was squarely literary – set texts in 1858 were Lessing, Schiller and Goethe – but there were also some prescient attempts to respond to increasing demands for "useful" German, with the introduction in 1888 of an optional examination in Commercial German, as part of a Cambridge Commercial Certificate. The Certificate was truly pioneering in that it was the first to include an (optional) conversation test. Six years earlier, the German pedagogue Wilhelm Viëtor had published his pamphlet *Quousque Tandem* (1882), a call for radical reform of language teaching in schools; Viëtor's ideas fell upon the fertile ground of the first generation of qualified modern language teachers across Europe. The inclusion of the optional conversation test is possibly the first tangible reaction by examiners in England to the increasing clamour of this newly professionalized body of language teachers for spending classroom time *speaking* the language. Even if the Reform Movement, as it came to be known, did not achieve widespread radical reform in its day, it did set the tone for the direction of travel throughout the twentieth century, in which spoken language proficiency gradually won greater prominence in teaching and assessment.

FRIDAY, Dec. 17, 1858. 6 to 7½ P.M.

II. C. 4. German.

(SECOND PAPER.)

1. TRANSLATE into ENGLISH PROSE:

Lebe glücklich, sagt'er. Ich gehe; denn alles bewegt sich
Jetzt auf Erden einmal, es scheint sich alles zu trennen.
Grundgesetze lösen sich auf der festesten Staaten,
Und es lös't der Besitz sich los vom alten Besitzer,
Freund sich los von Freund; so lös't sich Liebe von Liebe.
Ich verlasse dich hier; und, wo ich jemals dich wieder
Finde—wer weiss es? vielleicht sind diese Gespräche die letzten.
Nur ein Fremdling, sagt man mit Recht, ist der Mensch hier
auf Erden;

Mehr ein Fremdling als jemals ist nun ein jeder geworden.
Uns gehört der Boden nicht mehr; es wandern die Schätze;
Gold und Silber schmilzt aus den alten heiligen Formen;
Alles regt sich, als wollte die Welt, die gestaltete, rückwärts
Lösen in Chaos und Nacht sich auf, und neu sich gestalten.

GOETHE, *Herm. u. Dor.*

2. Translate into GERMAN (Roman characters may be used):

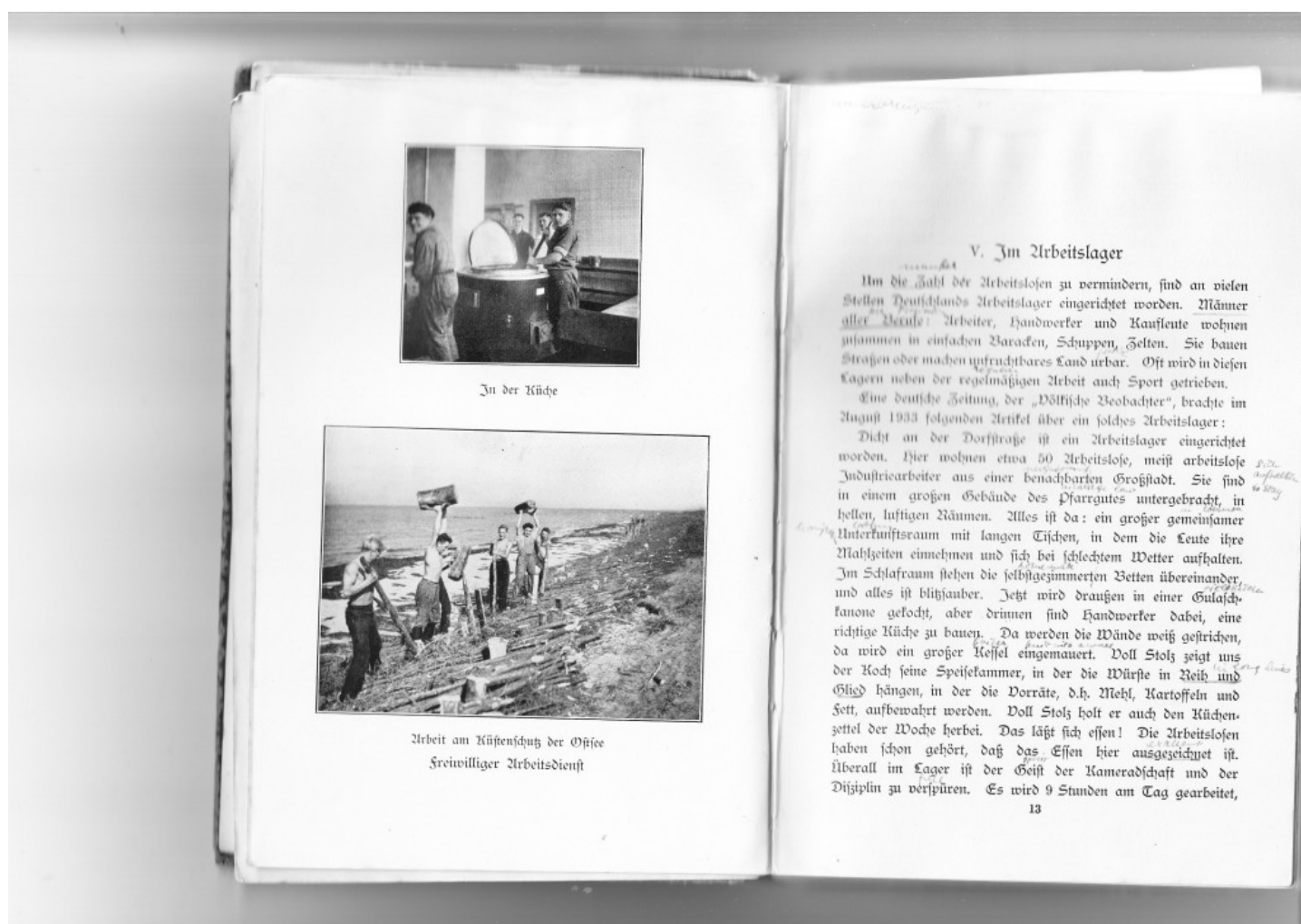
He that would seriously set upon the search of truth,
ought in the first place to prepare his mind with a love of it:
for he that loves it not, will not take much pains to get it,
nor be much concerned when he misses it. There is nobody
in the commonwealth of learning who does not profess himself
a lover of truth: and there is not a rational creature that would
not take it amiss to be thought otherwise of. And yet for all
this, one may truly say, there are very few lovers of truth for
truth's sake, even amongst those who persuade themselves that

As for the Commercial German examination itself, it was short-lived. Illustration 5 above shows one of the set tasks, a business letter (in German handwriting) to be translated into English. Laudable though the intention was, pupils floundered hopelessly. Only 8 of 49 candidates passed in the first year, 1888; after 1893, when there were only 8 entrants (with 5 passes), the examination was discontinued. Still, the aspirations of the Certificate were intended to address a difficult challenge: balancing the desire to meet vociferous public demand for mastering useful *skills* (whose difficulty is often wildly underestimated) against the constraints both of limited class-time and the political need to maintain the academic prestige of the subject. That balancing act was the challenge of the 20th century, in which the specification of skills in the Graded Objectives Movement, and ultimately in the Common European Framework of Reference, gained ever greater prominence; while cultural "content" knowledge became ever more marginalized – even cultural teaching became, to cite one dominant paradigm, framed in

terms of developing “intercultural *competence*”. That balancing act is, I believe, a conundrum as relevant today as it was in the 1880s.

Such challenges applied to all modern languages – but in the 20th century German faced its own unique challenges: two world wars and their aftermath. During and after World War I German’s popularity declined dramatically, prompting features with titles such as “The study of German after the war” (1917), “The status of German in Great Britain” (1918), “Should we teach German?” (1919) or “A plea for the study of German” (1919-1920), which weighed up whether to encourage learning “the language of the enemy”. Yet the 1930s saw a strong revival of interest; some new textbooks were even incautiously positive in their portrayal of contemporary Germany. A 1934 edition *Deutsches Leben* depicted labour camps as cheerful places mixing work and pleasure. (See illustration 6 below.)

Um die Zahl der Arbeitslosen zu vermindern sind an vielen Stellen Deutschlands Arbeitslager eingerichtet worden. Männer aller Berufe: Arbeiter, Handwerker, und Kaufleute, wohnen zusammen in einfachen Baracken, Schuppen, Zelten. Sie bauen Straßen oder machen unfruchtbares Land urbar. Oft wird in diesen Lagern neben der regelmäßigen Arbeit auch Sport getrieben.



Such 1930s textbooks mark the end of an era. After World War II, the case for German had to be won by teachers and textbooks in the face of overwhelming negative attitudes. As John le Carré recalled in 2010:

Why German? Because for most of my conscious childhood Germany had been the rogue elephant in the drawing room. Germans were murderous fellows. They had bombed one of my schools (which I did not entirely take amiss); they had bombed my grandparents’ tennis court, which was very serious, and I was terrified of them.

[...] I had a teacher who not only loved the language but was always at pains to remind his pupils here that there was another Germany, a decent one, far removed from the one we thought we knew about, and that was the Germany we would be able to explore once we understood its language.

At first, the battle for hearts and minds was universally tackled by passing in complete silence over World War II, turning instead to German folk tales, myths and legends. In the post-war *Deutschland und die Deutschen* (1952, 1956), for some years a set text for the Cambridge Board, photos portrayed nothing of post-war or even post-agrarian Germany, instead showing landscapes (Lüneburg Heath, the Rhine, Alps), Mainz cathedral; musicians in Swabian costume; the house of Schiller's birth with horse and cart out the front; and a painting of Schiller in Stuttgart. As one commentator concluded his analysis of textbooks used between 1945 and 1969, "If one only knew Germany from these pictures, it would seem like a country that belonged to the Middle Ages rather than to the twentieth century."

Only in the late 1960s, in concert with the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, was Germany's role in World War II addressed. *Sprich Mal Deutsch* (vol. III, 1969) broached the topic of remembering the war – or choosing not to remember – in a discussion between three young presenters deciding on a topic for their next youth radio programme:

Peter: [...] Wollen die jungen Leute noch mehr von dieser Nazizeit hören? Ich finde, wir sollten die ganze scheußliche Sache endlich mal ruhen lassen.

Anna: Und vergessen?

Peter: Ja, und vergessen – nein, vielleicht nicht vergessen, aber nicht mehr davon reden.

Anna: Ich bin nicht deiner Meinung. Ich finde es doch noch nötig, die jungen Leute davor zu warnen, wozu der Mensch fähig ist.[...]

Fritz: Man kann nicht einfach wegsehen, vergessen.

A historical overview of Hitler's rise to power followed, culminating in his thousand-year Reich, which "came to an end after the murder of six million Jews and the devastation of Europe with Hitler's suicide".

It was only after unification in 1990 that textbooks encompassed a historical overview reaching back beyond World War II: *Durchblick's* overview in 1994 stretched from the first attestation of the word *deutsch* in 786 (in the Latin form *theodisce*) up to 1990, concluding, "Nun leben die Deutschen wieder in Einheit". *Brennpunkt* (2000) presented a *Zeittafel* from 800 (Charlemagne's coronation) to 1990 ("Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands"). It is as if the story had felt incomplete before: now, history was presented as leading, despite many divisions on the way, to the predestined united Germany.

At the start of the 20th century, many teachers feared German would be squeezed out of a crowded curriculum by the dominance of French. In the early 21st century, that has not quite happened. German has survived a century of bad press ever since a writer lamented in the *Modern Language Teaching* journal of 1906 that "ten thousand devils in the guise of a cheap daily paper" fanned the flames of negative attitudes. On the other hand, German has lost its status as second foreign language to Spanish, not a fear expressed by anyone one hundred years ago. What the 22nd century will bring, we can only guess.

*This article is based on the Spalding Lecture presented at the Institute for Germanic and Romance Studies (now the Institute of Modern Languages Research) in 2013. Some readers may be interested in my forthcoming book: Nicola McLelland, *German Through English Eyes. A History of Language Teaching and Learning in Britain, 1500-2000* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, forthcoming in 2014). I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council for part-funding the research on which this article is based.