

Sonderweg

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Sonderweg (German: [ˈzɔndəˌveːk], "special path") identifies the theory in German historiography that considers the German-speaking lands or the country Germany itself to have followed a course from aristocracy to democracy unlike any other in Europe.

The modern school of thought by that name arose early during World War II as a consequence of the rise of Nazi Germany. In consequence of the scale of the devastation wrought on Europe by Nazi Germany, the *Sonderweg* theory of German history has progressively gained a following inside and outside Germany, especially since the late 1960s. In particular, its proponents argue that the way Germany developed over the centuries virtually ensured the evolution of a social and political order along the lines of Nazi Germany. In their view, German mentalities, the structure of society, and institutional developments followed a different course in comparison with the other nations of the West, which had a normal development of their histories. The German historian Heinrich August Winkler wrote about the question of there being a *Sonderweg*: "For a long time, educated Germans answered it in the positive, initially by laying claim to a special German mission, then, after the collapse of 1945, by criticizing Germany's deviation from the West. Today, the negative view is predominant. Germany did not, according to the now prevailing opinion, differ from the great European nations to an extent that would justify speaking of a 'unique German path'. And, in any case, no country on earth ever took what can be described as the 'normal path'".^[1]



The term *Sonderweg* was first used by German conservatives in the Imperial period, starting in the late 19th century as a source of pride at the "Golden Mean"^[2] of governance that in their view had been attained by the German state, whose distinctiveness as

an authoritarian state lay in taking the initiative in instituting social reforms, imposing them without waiting to be pressured by demands "from below". This type of authoritarianism was seen to be avoiding both the autocracy of Imperial Russia and what they regarded as the weak, decadent and ineffective democratic governments of Britain and France.^[3] The idea of Germany as a great Central European power, neither of the West nor of the East was to be a recurring feature of right-wing German thought right up to 1945.

Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler of the Bielefeld School places the origins of Germany's path to disaster in the 1860s and 1870s, when economic modernization took place, but political modernization did not happen and the old Prussian rural elite remained in firm control of the army, diplomacy and the civil service. Traditional, aristocratic, premodern society battled an emerging capitalist, bourgeois, modernizing society. Recognizing the importance of modernizing forces in industry and the economy and in the cultural realm, Wehler argues that reactionary traditionalism dominated the political hierarchy of power in Germany, as well as social mentalities and in class relations (*Klassenhabitus*).^[4]

During World War II

Nazi Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and its invasion of Poland in September 1939 (the latter invasion immediately drawing France and Britain into World War II) provoked the drive to explain the phenomenon of Nazi Germany. In 1940, Sebastian Haffner, a German émigré living in Britain, published *Germany: Jekyll and Hyde*, in which he argued it was Adolf Hitler alone, by the force of his peculiar personality, who had brought about Nazi Germany. In 1941, the British diplomat Robert Vansittart published *The Black Record: Germans Past And Present*, according to which Nazism was only the latest manifestation of what Vansittart argued were the exclusively German traits of aggressiveness and brutality. Other books with a

thesis similar to Vansittart's were Rohan Butler's *The Roots of National Socialism* (1941) and William Montgomery McGovern's *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Nazi-Fascist Philosophy* (1946).^[5]