



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 137,847
Area (sq. km.): 357,022

Germany is slightly smaller than Japan. It is close in size to the U.S. state of Montana but has more than 80 times as many people. There are four main geographic regions: the broad lowlands, in the north; the central uplands, which include various small mountain ranges; the wide valley and gorge of the Rhine River, in the southwest; and the forested mountains and plateaus of the south. The Rhine, Danube, and Elbe rivers flow through Germany, as do the Weser and Oder, all of which are important trade and transportation routes. About 30 percent of Germany is forested. Germany's tallest mountain is the Zugspitze, at 9,721 feet (2,963 meters).

The climate is generally temperate, with mild summers and wet winters. In the winter, average temperatures range between 35°F (2°C) in the lowland areas and 21°F (-6°C) in the mountains. In July, average temperatures are between 64°F (18°C) in low-lying regions and 68°F (20°C) in the southern valleys. Rain amounts are heavier in the north, although snowfall is greater in the south.

History

Unification and the World Wars

Prior to becoming part of the Holy Roman Empire, Germany was a patchwork of small, separate principalities. Although officially a nation-state in 1871, Germany passed through

three wars (1864–70) before Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck finally united the country into a powerful, industrialized nation. In 1914, Germany allied with Austria and Turkey after the assassination of an Austrian official. In 1917, the United States joined Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan to defeat Germany and its allies. Germany was made to pay huge reparations, admit guilt for the war, and cede about one-tenth of its territory. A democratic state, known as the Weimar Republic, was established in 1918.

The country's humiliation was worsened by the economic depression of the 1920s. In addition, the newly elected legislature proved to be fragmented and ineffective, leading many Germans to believe that democracy was an inefficient way to organize society. Germany's distress gave rise to Austrian-born Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party. In 1933, President Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor after the Nazi Party dominated the elections. In 1934, the day after Hindenburg died, the posts of president and chancellor were combined, and Hitler declared himself *Führer* (leader) of the Third Reich. He soon embroiled Germany and the world in World War II. Before being defeated by the Allied forces in 1945, the Nazis occupied much of the continent, killing huge numbers of people, including six million Jews and many gypsies, homosexuals, and mentally disabled people, whom they considered unfit for society.

Western and Eastern Germany

After the war, Germany was split into occupation zones to facilitate disarmament and organize a democracy. When the Soviet Union failed to meet these goals, the zones occupied by the Western Allies became the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), a democratic nation. The Soviets created the

German Democratic Republic (GDR) out of the eastern zone. The GDR followed the Soviet model of development.

Thousands of people fled the east, so the GDR built the Berlin Wall (1961) to shut off access to West Berlin. The wall remained a symbol of the Cold War until late 1989, when it was opened to traffic on both sides. The wall was eventually torn down, and the two nations became the reunified Federal Republic of Germany on 3 October 1990. Although Berlin regained its status as the country's capital, the actual transition from Bonn (West Germany's capital) lasted nearly a decade.

International Relations

In 1957, West Germany was a founding member of the European Community, which is now known as the European Union (EU). It had joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1955, but the German constitution restricted the military to German soil. In 1993, policy changes allowed troops to participate in UN peacekeeping and relief operations in Somalia, Bosnia, and Yugoslavia.

Political Transitions and Economic Policy

Helmut Kohl, who was a driving force behind German reunification, failed to be reelected in 1998 after serving as chancellor for 16 years, the longest term of any democratically elected German leader. A year later, a party finance scandal involving him became public, damaging both his and his party's reputation. Angela Merkel was elected to be the first female chancellor in 2005 and became one of the most dominant leaders in Europe.

Germany has prioritized reforming immigration policy and defining the country's relationship with the West and Europe. As the largest economic power in Europe, Germany has become a leader in the eurozone crisis of 2011. Even though the country now cooperates with struggling economies like those of Greece and Spain, bailing out other European economies was initially an unpopular strategy within Germany. Merkel has been arguing for greater European integration, which would allow closer monitoring of the eurozone, though Germany is also wary of giving up more power to the European Union.

Recent Events and Trends

- **U.S. spying:** In July 2014, Germany expelled the chief of the CIA's Berlin station after the arrest of a German intelligence officer who was allegedly spying for the United States. This event follows the October 2013 leaking of documents from the U.S. National Security Agency suggesting that the United States monitored the communications of German chancellor Angela Merkel for over a decade. The revelations have strained relations between the United States and Germany, and Merkel called spying between allies inappropriate and a violation of trust.
- **Anniversary of fall of Berlin Wall:** In November 2014, Germany celebrated the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wall separated West Germany from communist East Germany during the Cold War. German chancellor Angela Merkel and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev spoke at the celebrations in Berlin.
- **Pegida rallies:** In fall 2014 and early 2015, a group called Pegida (short for Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West) began holding weekly rallies across the country. The right-wing group protests Germany's high rate of

immigration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries like Turkey. In January, Germans supporting immigration and tolerance held even larger counterdemonstrations.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Population: 80,996,685

Population Growth Rate: -0.18%

Urban Population: 74%

Germany's population is primarily ethnic German (91.5 percent). Minority groups include those from Turkey (2.4 percent), the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, and Poland. The country is highly urbanized.

Immigrants, especially non-citizen guest workers, comprise a significant percentage of some metropolitan populations. In western states, numerous political refugees from the Middle East, India, Africa, and Asia receive room and board until their applications for asylum are processed. Also, many ethnic Germans have emigrated from eastern European nations in search of work. However, the government has been looking into ways of stemming the flow of "economic" refugees. New laws restrict the definition of a valid asylum seeker and limit other forms of immigration. Though there have been incidents of violence against immigrant groups, these events reflect the feelings of only a small minority of Germans.

Language

German is the official language, but the German taught in school and used in the media may differ slightly from the language used in daily conversation if dialects are spoken. Regional dialects vary greatly: the dialect from Bonn or Hannover is distinct from that of Munich (München), where Bavarian is spoken, or Halle, where Saxon is spoken. However, most people do not speak in pure dialect very often; instead, their dialects may color their accents. Dialects are mostly oral and are part of folk literature and music. In all dialects of the written language, all nouns are capitalized.

English, widely understood, is a required school subject, and many employees continue taking extra English classes after being hired by a company. Many Germans in eastern states understand and speak Russian.

Religion

About a third of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, while another third is Protestant (mostly Lutheran). Historically, entire towns and regions belonged to one faith, according to the local ruler's choice. These divisions are still visible today, as Catholics reside mostly in the south and west and Protestants in the north and east.

Today, a number of other Christian denominations are also active, and almost 4 percent of Germans are Muslim. Although most Germans are Christian, society is highly secular and about 28 percent of the people claim no religious affiliation.

General Attitudes

Germans are industrious, honest, thrifty, and orderly. They appreciate traits such as punctuality, privacy, intelligence, and skill. They have a strong sense of regional pride, a fact the federal system of government recognizes and accommodates. World War II broke down class distinctions because most people lost their possessions and had to start over again. Germany emerged as a land of freedom and opportunity after the war.

Germans appreciate intelligent conversation but may be wary of unfamiliar or different ideas. Many are prone to skepticism. A typical German attitude is reflected in the phrases *Das geht mich nicht an* (That's not my business) or *Ich will meine Ruhe* (I want my peace of mind), both of which suggest an aloofness that some non-Germans might find confusing.

Most Germans have a strong classical education because of the nation's rich heritage in music, history, science, and art, and they expect others to appreciate that background. Former East Germans have also nurtured their cultural heritage, but after four decades of life under communism, it is not surprising that they have somewhat different attitudes toward daily life and work.

During the 1990s, tensions existed between people in the west and east over matters relating to reunification. Some easterners felt they were treated as second-class citizens, receiving lower salaries, getting blamed for tax hikes, and being ridiculed by their western counterparts. Some easterners said that they were better off under communism. Westerners resented the economic burden of rebuilding the east; some believed easterners were less capable and unrefined. Such tensions have largely waned today, though unemployment in the east remains a problem.

Personal Appearance

Germans follow European fashion trends and take care to be well dressed in public. Sloppy or overly casual attire is inappropriate. Shorts and sandals are common leisure wear in summer but are considered to be quite casual. Women, particularly older women, wear cosmetics sparingly.

Hints of traditional culture may be part of one's modern daily wardrobe. In southern Germany (mostly southern Bavaria), some people wear full traditional attire during festivals and celebrations. Traditional costumes include *Lederhosen* (leather pants), *Dirndkleider* (dresses with gathered waists and full skirts, worn with an apron), Bavarian suits, and alpine hats.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

The most common form of greeting is a handshake. A man waits for a woman to extend her hand before shaking it; in mixed company he shakes a woman's hand before a man's. In groups, several people do not shake hands at once; crossing someone else's handshake is inappropriate.

Germans generally do not greet strangers on the street, although sincere smiles are appreciated. The most common

verbal greeting is *Guten Tag* (Good day). Some may use a simple *Hallo* (Hello). Southern Germans may use *Griß Gott* ("Greetings," or literally, "Greet God").

By tradition, only family members and close friends address each other by first name. Others use titles and surnames. However, this is changing among the younger generation. When Germans address a stranger, acquaintance, or colleague, one combines *Herr* (Mr.), *Frau* (Mrs. or Miss), or other titles with the person's professional title and last name. These titles can also be used without the name. For example, a male professor is addressed as *Herr Professor*; a female head of a department in business or government could be addressed as *Frau Direktor*.

Gestures

Chewing gum in public is inappropriate. Talking with one's hands in the pockets is disrespectful. People cross the legs with one knee over the other and do not place feet on furniture. Pointing the index finger to one's own head is an insult indicating the other person is crazy. To wish luck, Germans "squeeze the thumb" instead of crossing fingers. That is, they fold the thumb in and close the fingers on it.

Visiting

Germans appreciate punctuality, but hosts are not insulted if guests arrive a few minutes late. Dinner guests often bring an odd number of flowers, avoiding roses (symbolizing romantic love). They unwrap flowers before giving them to the hostess.

Guests usually stand when the host enters the room and remain standing until offered a seat again. It is also courteous to stand when a woman enters the room. Not everyone adheres to these rules of etiquette, but it is polite to do so.

Hosts almost always serve refreshments to guests, even during short visits. Spontaneous visits, even between neighbors, are not very common, but this is changing among young people. Because arrangements generally are made in advance, unannounced visitors are sometimes not invited to come in but talk standing at the door, which is sometimes considered ill-mannered by non-Germans.

Germans enjoy gathering for conversation and social events, although Germans in the south tend to be more reserved than those in the north. While dinner parties may last well into the night, daytime visits are usually short, except in the case of afternoon teatime, called *Kaffee-trinken*, where tea or coffee and cakes or cookies are served.

Eating

Germans eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. They keep their hands above the table, with wrists resting on the edge. When potatoes and fish are served, Germans do not cut them with a knife because this indicates to the cook that they are not fully cooked. Leaving food on the plate is considered wasteful.

Most Germans prefer beer, wine, or mineral water with their meals; they rarely drink tap water. Soft drinks and fruit juices are also popular. Germans prefer drinks without ice. Because of the tradition of bottled water, Germany does not have drinking fountains.

In restaurants, the bill usually includes a service charge

and is paid at the table. Customers often round up the total, giving the server the difference as an extra tip (*Trinkgeld*). When friends eat out together, it is acceptable for each one to pay for his or her own meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Large families are uncommon, even in rural areas. The average family has only one or two children. In many cases, younger couples are choosing not to start a family due to the cost of time and money that having children requires, even though the government provides monthly payments to those with children.

Order, responsibility, and achievement are traditional family values. People today, especially in the west, practice a greater variety of lifestyles than in the past. Most young adults prefer to live away from home once they become wage earners or go on to a university.

Because of the emancipation of German women, there are a large number of single mothers in the country. There are two main reasons for this: When a divorce occurs, women usually obtain custody of any children. And German society is more tolerant of children born to single women, so single women who get pregnant are becoming more likely to keep the child rather than have an abortion.

Parents and Children

Because in many German families both parents work, time for their children is often scarce. It is not uncommon for children to go to and from school by themselves starting at the age of six or seven. Children can often be seen wearing house keys around their necks like necklaces so that they do not lose them and so they can get into their family's apartment after school. As most German households are equipped with microwave ovens, working mothers often prepare lunch for their children before leaving the house. Children can then easily heat up the meal and feed themselves.

Children of working parents often go to tutoring centers where they receive help in doing their homework. These centers are relatively affordable and are used by many middle and working class families. Children from wealthier families usually get help from nannies or private tutors if they need help with school or daily life.

Gender Roles

Traditionally, the father is head of the family. Both parents often work, more so in the east than in the west. The role of wives has changed significantly in the past few decades. Nevertheless, in the case where both partners work, the woman still takes the lead in managing the household, making sure the cleaning, washing, and cooking is done. Expectant mothers can take six weeks of maternal leave before the birth of their child and up to one year afterward.

German women are considered very emancipated. They enjoy the same rights as men. Almost equal numbers of girls and boys attend schools and universities in both east and west Germany, which provides both sexes with an equal chance to educate themselves in a chosen field and pursue a

professional career.

Housing

Urban

Most people, whether single or part of a family, live in apartments, especially in larger cities. The size of these apartments ranges from very small studio (single room) apartments to larger units with several rooms. Single-family homes are by no means rare, but tend to be very expensive.

In urban areas, people often own or rent small garden plots (*Schrebergärten*) located in or near the city. In the countryside or in more expensive neighborhoods, private gardens are more numerous.

Rural

Houses in smaller cities or rural areas tend to have pointed, tiled roofs. Traditional thatched-roof houses can still be found in the northern part of Germany. Cement, bricks, and (in the south) wood are common construction materials. Except in northern Germany, where the water table is much higher, most German homes contain a cellar. Thick insulation is used to regulate inside temperatures, since air conditioning is scarce.

Ownership

Germany has one of the lowest home-ownership rates in Europe. Nearly half of the population does not own their home; renting is particularly common in big cities. However, home ownership is becoming more popular, in part because of low mortgage rates and rising rent costs. The rate of home ownership is lower in the east than in the west.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Dating is different in Germany than in the United States. In fact, the German language does not even have a word for *dating*. A more popular form of meeting each other is for young men and women to socialize on a very casual basis. Groups of friends meet in clubs, restaurants, and pubs for conversation, eating, and drinking. Online dating services are becoming more popular among those whose schedules make traditional socializing difficult.

If a person wants to go out with someone in particular, either sex can suggest a *Verabredung* (appointment). They each pay for their own food and entertainment (unless one offers to pay for a special occasion). Germans prefer substantive conversations about current events, philosophy, or politics, rather than superficial "small talk" when they meet someone. They usually try to make respectful, honest comments, rather than avoiding disagreement and pretending to agree with each other.

German society is more open about sexuality than that of the United States, and it is not uncommon for German teenagers to engage in sexual activity as early as 15 or 16. Girls generally begin seeing a gynecologist as early as 12 or 13.

Engagement

The tradition of the man asking a woman's father for his approval of the marriage is still practiced among some Germans. Engagements generally last one to two years. The family of the bride—particularly among conservative,

wealthy, or rural Germans—pays for the cost of the wedding.

Marriage in Society

Couples usually marry in their late twenties, but they often wait until they have some financial security. Although many Germans see marriage as a desirable option, it is increasingly common for young people to live together before or instead of marrying. The government offers tax advantages to couples who are legally married. Legal marriages are performed at the city hall; religious ceremonies are optional. Divorce is common.

Life Cycle

Birth

Prenatal care is taken very seriously in Germany. Pregnant women and their partners are encouraged to attend courses to prepare them for the birth of the child. It is common to keep a pregnancy to oneself until the third month, when it is less likely to lose the child. Most babies are born in hospitals.

When a child is born, parents usually send out a photograph of the newborn to close friends and family, who in return congratulate the couple with a greeting card. Sometimes money and gifts are included. Once the mother and baby return home and have had time to adjust, family and friends come to visit and take photographs of the baby.

Traditionally, children were named after parents or grandparents, but this practice is fading. In the eastern part of Germany, in particular, many children have American names like Candy, Mandy, Jennifer, Kevin, or Collin—a practice from the time (before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) when East Germans looked to the United States as a desirable but unattainable ideal. This popular practice continues today.

Milestones

In Christian families, babies are baptized when they are a few weeks old. Godparents are chosen and given the responsibility to raise the child should something happen to the parents. After the baptism, families gather for a meal. When Catholic children turn nine, they have their First Communion. Protestant children are confirmed at age 15. Both events are marked by large gifts of money.

The 18th birthday brings formal adulthood, including a driver's license and the right to drink alcohol and gamble. The 30th birthday is also considered an important milestone because it marks when a young adult has reached the age of full maturity and responsibility.

Married couples celebrate 25th and 50th wedding anniversaries with family and close friends. Birthdays beyond the 50th are also celebrated quite elaborately, often bringing the entire extended family together to see each other. These gatherings are usually held in a restaurant or in the home of the couple. Gifts are often presented to the couple but are not always necessary.

Death

When a person dies, funeral cards containing a picture of the deceased, the birth and death dates, and a saying or proverb are distributed. At the funeral, people dress in black and shake hands with the deceased's family.

After the funeral, attendees often share a meal and tell friendly and humorous stories about the deceased person; however, if the person died as a child or experienced an

unexpectedly sudden death, there is generally no meal served. Friends and relatives send cards with money to the family of the deceased to defray the cost of the funeral and graveside decorations.

Throughout Germany, it is common for people to plant flowers in addition to placing other plants at the grave sites of their loved ones. Relatives and close friends visit the grave regularly. They plant and care for flowers and little bushes or, if they can afford it, hire gardeners to maintain the graves.

Diet

While regional dishes vary, potatoes, noodles, dumplings, sauces, vegetables, and pastries are common in Germany. Pork is popular, as are beef and chicken. Pork is prepared according to regional tradition; it may be boiled with cabbage in Frankfurt, roasted with dumplings in München, or prepared as ham in Westphalia. Lamb is widely available in the north. Fish is popular in North Sea areas such as Hamburg but also in Bavaria, where trout is plentiful. In the southwest, a couple of specialty items—*maultaschen* (dough filled with meat or vegetables) and *kaesespaetzle* (noodles with cheese)—are very popular. Every region has its own type of *Wurst* (sausage). Sweets, chocolate, and cakes are enjoyed throughout the country.

Breakfast consists of rolls and various combinations of jam, honey, meat, cheese, and hard boiled eggs served with coffee, tea, or milk. Hot and cold cereals are increasingly popular. The principal meal, traditionally served at midday, includes soup, a main dish, and dessert. For the lighter evening meal (*Abendbrot*), open-faced sandwiches (cheese, meats, and spreads) are common, although full meals are the norm in restaurants. Two-income families rarely have a big midday meal, saving the main meal for evening.

Germans buy groceries often and prefer fresh foods for cooking. Ethnic dishes (especially Italian, Greek, Chinese, and Turkish) and fast foods are popular. Germans are known for their beer making and drinking. They also enjoy domestic and imported wines. However, the younger generation of Germans consumes less alcohol overall than the older generation.

Recreation

Sports

Germans enjoy hiking, skiing, swimming, cycling, and playing tennis, among other things. Wealthy Germans enjoy playing golf, and numerous business deals are made on golf courses. Participation in organized sports has changed as a result of reunification, emphasizing a uniform club system.

Soccer (*Fußball*) is the most popular sport, and millions of Germans have become devoted, lifelong fans to their favorite soccer club. Soccer stadiums are full on weekends, as millions of spectators flock to see their favorite teams play. Bayern München is an especially popular team. Germany's team traditionally participates in World Cup competitions, which it hosted in 2006.

Leisure

People enjoy watching television or getting together with friends. Germans, especially younger Germans, also enjoy movies. New films are released on Thursdays, and many

people go to the movie theaters after work. Young Germans often congregate at movie theaters to meet each other. Dancing is also gaining in popularity among youth. Recently, young people have taken up learning dances from other regions, such as South America and India. Internationally-themed dance schools have opened in many areas, and during the summer these schools put on programs featuring dancing and food from different countries.

Garden plots with small gazebos offer space for barbecues and relaxation on summer evenings. Because meat is a part of many of Germany's popular dishes, grilling is a popular recreation activity. Families and friends meet in their own gardens (yards) or in public grilling places, where they prepare a fire and then grill sausages, meat, and vegetables. For those who are vegetarian, there are also vegetarian sausages that can be grilled. Beer usually accompanies these activities. Grilling equipment is sold even in gas stations during the summertime because most supermarkets are closed on Sundays.

Spending time with pets is another popular German pastime. Most families have a dog or a cat, and many have rabbits or guinea pigs. Pet shops abound, and Germans spend many thousands of dollars registering and providing healthcare for their animals. Data chips are inserted under a dog's skin so that the owner's name and address can be located if the animal escapes or gets lost.

Vacation

Germans consider themselves *Weltmeisters* (world champions) at taking vacations. Schools are closed for a total of 13 weeks every year, and company and government employees get six weeks of leave and several public holidays off during the year.

Germans in the west have long relished travel. Favorite travel destinations are typically warmer spots, such as the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Greece, Spain, and Turkey. Those in the east have been able to travel since 1989, when Communist travel restrictions were lifted.

The Arts

Cultural arts, especially music and theater, are well supported in Germany. Numerous world-renowned composers, artists, philosophers, and writers are German, including the artist Albrecht Dürer, the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, and the philosopher Karl Marx. Private support and government subsidies allow even the smallest cities to have professional orchestras, opera companies, and at least one museum. Expressionism continues to be a hallmark of German fine art. Festivals and performances draw large audiences throughout the country. Local arts might include weaving, wood carving, and wood-block printing.

Holidays

Labor union parades mark May Day (1 May). Various religious holidays (Catholic and Protestant) are celebrated, such as Pentecost, Ascension, and All Saints' Day (1 Nov.). The German Unification Day is celebrated on 3 October.

Sylvester

New Year's celebrations begin on *Sylvester* (31 Dec.) with midnight fireworks and parties, which are followed by a

public holiday on 1 January. Sylvester is often celebrated abroad; popular destinations are Switzerland, Austria, and France. Germans like to go skiing and hiking in the snow during this season.

At the end of the year, people reflect on the past months and analyze their vices. They often express a desire to change their lives for the coming year. Some of the more common changes are to stop smoking, get more exercise, and drink less alcohol, all of which reflect a German trend towards a healthier lifestyle.

Fasching

Another important holiday in Germany is *Fasching* (Carnival), which is celebrated every year beginning in late January or early February and lasting until the end of February or the beginning of March, depending on when Easter falls. Celebrations begin at the 11th minute of the 11th hour and are meant to mark a farewell to winter and a welcoming of spring. Schools close for a week, and both children and adults dress up in costumes. Parades with music and dancing are common throughout the country.

Easter

Easter is celebrated with Sunday worship services and Monday family gatherings. On Easter Sunday, parents hide little gifts around the house or outside in the yard for their children to find. The Easter Bunny is said to have left these gifts. Children search for the gifts and then show them to the adults once they have found them. Easter gifts are typically smaller than Christmas gifts and often include food, such as chocolate Easter bunnies.

Christmas

Beginning in early December, outdoor Christmas markets attract large crowds of shoppers, who enjoy the handicrafts, art, and food on sale. Although Christmas is widely celebrated in Germany, its religious roots are becoming less obvious. Older, more traditional Germans usually visit a church on Christmas Eve (24 Dec.). People exchange gifts on Christmas Eve (*Heiliger Abend*). It is said that the *Christkind* (Christ child) brings the gifts. Families relax on Christmas Day. On 25 or 26 December, a goose (*Weihnachtsgans*) is cooked or grilled. Sweet cookies, such as gingerbread or almond biscuits, often flavored with cinnamon, are a popular treat during the Christmas season. Germans enjoy visiting on 26 December, also a legal holiday.

Most families put up a traditional *Weihnachtsbaum* (Christmas tree) in their homes. These are typically decorated with glass balls and candles. Traditional colors of red and gold are often used, but modern decorations are available in many colors.

Young couples often find it difficult to choose which family they will spend Christmas with. They often compromise by commuting between both households. Once they have children, young couples tend to celebrate Christmas Eve in their own homes.

SOCIETY

Government

Head of State: Pres. Joachim Gauck

Head of Government: Chancellor Angela Merkel

Capital: Berlin

Structure

Germany is a federal parliamentary republic. The country has 16 states (*Länder*), each of which has its own legislature and autonomy over issues that are not specifically reserved for the federal government in the constitution. The country's president is elected as head of state by members of the federal and state legislatures to serve for up to two five-year terms. The president's duties are mostly ceremonial.

The chancellor is the head of government and is elected by a majority of the lower house of Parliament, or the Federal Assembly (*Bundestag*), to a four-year term. The upper house is called the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*). State governments select the 69 members of the *Bundesrat*. The 622 members of the *Bundestag* are elected by popular vote, some through majoritarian systems and others through proportional representation. Members of Parliament serve four-year terms.

Political Landscape

Major political parties include the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP); the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party; and the left-wing *Die Linke* (The Left). Power generally alternates between a center-left coalition (usually the SPD and the Green Party) and a center-right coalition (usually the CDU and the FDP).

Merkel is chairperson of the CDU, which leads Germany's current ruling coalition. Germany's major political parties have adopted candidate quotas to ensure that women are appropriately represented in politics. In order to limit the influence of extremist parties, there is a minimum threshold of 5 percent of the national vote or three directly elected seats to be represented in the *Bundestag*.

Major political issues facing Germany include reforming immigration policy and defining the country's relationship with the West and Europe. The CDU traditionally favors greater European integration, though many Germans are wary of giving up more power to the European Union, especially following the eurozone crisis of 2011.

Government and the People

Germany's constitution secures for its citizens a wide variety of rights, which are generally respected. The freedoms of groups associated with Nazism are sometimes limited. Corruption is very low in Germany. In addition to being transparent, elections are also free and fair. The voting age is 18. Voter turnout in Germany regularly exceeds 70 percent.

Economy

GDP (PPP) in billions: \$3,227

GDP (PPP) per capita: \$39,500

Germany is one of the top economic powers in the world and provides leadership and generous financial support to the European Union (EU). As a whole, the country has a high gross domestic product per capita; however, the east's economy is far weaker than the west's. East German prices typically are as high as those in the west, but salaries, rents, and overall living conditions remain lower.

The east has made substantial progress in its shift toward a market economy; however, the region still relies heavily on subsidies (around US\$80 billion a year) from the economically powerful western states. The government has undertaken huge projects to retrain workers and rebuild roads, railways, public transportation, and communications facilities. More private investment is required to revitalize eastern industries and relieve the west of heavy tax burdens.

Inflation is low. Generous social benefits, rigid work rules, and high labor costs have been obstacles to reviving the economy and reestablishing the country's global competitiveness. Germany fell into recession in 2008 after responding to the global financial crisis with a US\$675 billion rescue package and a guarantee on personal bank deposits. The economy began growing again in 2010 as manufacturing exports rebounded, primarily exports for countries outside of the EU. However, Germany continues to carry much of the financial burden for the eurozone.

Germany is traditionally one of the world's largest exporters. Main exports include cars, televisions and other manufactured goods, steel, and aluminum. Construction, manufacturing, and service industries are important components of the domestic economy. In 2002, the euro replaced the Deutsche Mark as Germany's currency.

Transportation and Communications

Internet Users (per 100 people): 84

Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 119

Paved Roads: 100%

Most German families have cars; owning one is more important to Germans than to many other Europeans. They especially favor cars for touring or traveling long distances. Public transportation and bike riding are more efficient for daily travel in major cities because of the heavy traffic and limited parking. Subways, buses, streetcars, and trains form the main transportation network. Trains connect nearly every town and city. Drivers carefully obey traffic rules. One must attend expensive and rigorous driver-training classes and pass exams to qualify for a driver's license.

The communications system is modern and fully developed. Telephone and postal services have been privatized since the mid-1990s and are efficient. There are more cellular phones in use than landlines. About 90 percent of German households have a television with cable or satellite. Many Germans own computers and most have access to the internet. Because Holocaust denial and promotion of neo-Nazi propaganda are illegal in Germany, related offensive remarks are censored from all media and violators may be imprisoned. In 2012, the social networking site Twitter enacted a local censorship policy for the first time, blocking German access to a Neo-Nazi account.

Education

Adult Literacy: 99%

Mean Years of Schooling: 12.9

Structure

Education is a source of pride, especially in the areas of

technology and craftsmanship. The states administer public education. Preschool begins around age four. Full-time schooling is mandatory for students between ages 6 and 15, and part- or full-time schooling continues on a chosen track until age 18. At age 11, children are divided into three groups according to the grades they have earned up to that point.

Access

Students may enter a job-training program, train for specific professional careers, or study to enter a university, depending on their achievement. Those with the highest grades go on to an academic high school called a *Gymnasium*, which lasts between 12 and 13 years. Those in the middle group attend a high school known as *Realschule*, which is two years shorter than *Gymnasium* and leads to an apprenticeship in a company afterwards. The third group goes to a high school called *Hauptschule*, which lasts a total of nine years. Graduates of this program usually proceed to apprenticeships in the manual or technical fields. Children with learning difficulties or language barriers can go to special institutions called *Sonderschule*, where they learn German, among other things.

Nearly every occupation, from mechanic to waiter to accountant, has a school or program designed specifically for it. For example, waiters and waitresses might attend school for up to three years before certifying as servers. Because of this training, their salaries are much higher than those of their counterparts in the United States.

Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are highly subsidized, but entrance to universities is difficult. Access to public universities is determined by a student's score on the *Abitur* exam (taken at the end of *Gymnasium*), grade point average, and time since graduation from *Gymnasium*. Those who have been waiting longer for university entrance are given priority. Private schools and medical schools require additional testing. Adults can continue their education through evening classes.

Private universities have appeared, particularly in the western part of Germany over the past ten years. Some of these offer a very rigorous level of education, but tuition is often very expensive. A few boarding schools are available but the cost to attend is prohibitive for most families. Many German medical students often study in Austria because admission requirements there are less restrictive than in Germany.

Lifelong learning is important in Germany. Adult education centers (*Volkshochschule*) offer a variety of courses that can be taken in the evening. The subjects offered include languages, cooking, business, computers, culture, and many more. These courses are generally affordable and accessible to nearly everyone. Recently, online courses have evolved in Germany. Languages and other subjects can be studied at home while course materials are provided via e-mail. Tests can be taken at various regional offices throughout the country. These courses are most popular with those under the age of 40.

Health

Germany has a good healthcare system. The government controls fees, but some co-payments are required, and for the past several years, most dental and visual care is paid for out

of pocket. In addition, fees on prescriptions have risen recently, and elective treatments are often delayed. Private doctors also practice, but most people have access to care in hospitals and clinics. Both government and private health insurance are available, and immediate family members are covered under an employee's insurance. When workers become ill, they receive up to six weeks of full pay while they recover. People in eastern states suffer more often from illnesses related to pollution.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Capital | Berlin |
| Population | 80,996,685 (rank=17) |
| Area (sq. mi.) | 137,847 (rank=62) |
| Area (sq. km.) | 357,022 |
| Human Development Index | 6 of 187 countries |
| Gender Inequality Index | 3 of 148 countries |
| GDP (PPP) per capita | \$39,500 |
| Adult Literacy | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant Mortality | 3 per 1,000 births |
| Life Expectancy | 78 (male); 83 (female) |
| Currency | Euro |

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