



German History in Documents and Images

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Felix Gilbert on His Decision to Become a Historian (Retrospective Account, 1988)

In this short excerpt, the well-known historian Felix Gilbert describes how his experience of revolutionary events – ones that shaped the course of German history in the twentieth century – influenced his choice of profession. After his first semester in Heidelberg (summer semester of 1923), Gilbert spent two years working as an editorial assistant on a document collection published by the German Foreign Office under the title *The Great Politics of the European Cabinets, 1871-1914* [*Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914*].

In my first semester at Heidelberg I decided quickly and assuredly to make history my principal field of study. The reason, of course, was not that history was the subject of the first book I had read, nor that other plans did not work out. The study of history seemed of overwhelming importance and irresistible attraction because of the world in which I had grown up, a world of politics. I was nine and had just entered the Gymnasium when the First World War broke out; I was thirteen when the war ended in defeat and Germany became a republic; I was eighteen and had just completed my first semester at the University of Heidelberg when the German inflation led to near civil war in Saxony and Bavaria and to the devaluation of the mark. War, revolution, and social turmoil, in an interlocking chain, shaped the crucial years of my youth.

Too young to fight in the war, but old enough to have to decide about my future course before the world had again settled into a stable pattern, I felt—and many of my contemporaries shared this feeling—that we belonged to a special generation, different from the ones that preceded and followed mine. Skeptical about the values of the past, we were also skeptical about the likelihood of stability in the future.

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