

Germany, an object lesson

Neil MacGregor introduces us to a little known land, Alan Philps writes

From the window in Neil MacGregor's office you can see the swirling crowds of visitors in the courtyard of the British Museum. Seven million people a year squeeze through the Museum's narrow door – almost double the number in 2000.

MacGregor, director since 2002, puts the rise in visitors down to the stunning redesign of the Great Court inside the museum with its glass and steel roof which has made the museum more visitor friendly. But much of the credit must go to him for his passionate belief that history should be central to our understanding of the world as it is today.

'One of the purposes of the museum,' he says 'has been to offer the public the history they need to make sense of the world now'. Throughout our conversation, 'history' is often paired with the word 'need'.

In pursuit of this mission he has mounted exhibitions on Iran and Afghanistan. The latest country in the spotlight



One of the items from the exhibition: etching by Emil Norde

is, surprisingly, Germany. *Germany: Memories of a Nation* uses 200 objects to tell the country's history in a way that challenges the British obsession with Second World War images.

It follows the extraordinary success of MacGregor's *History of the World in 100 Objects* – a series of 100 15-minute BBC radio broadcasts in which the director brings to life exotic pieces from the museum's collection. Thanks to his beguiling delivery, both erudite and puckish, the podcasts have been downloaded 24 million times. It was a stroke of genius to see that radio was the perfect medium to tell a story in pictures.

This project is a tougher sell. Since 1914 Britain has not been much interested in Germany history or culture, except for the period of the Third Reich which is relentlessly studied at school. MacGregor wants people to understand that those 12 years are 'historically a complete anomaly'. That was the only time that Germany was centrally controlled, yet it shapes British stereotypes of Germany as a nation in jackboots.

The absence of modern European history in the school curriculum is a 'very serious problem', he says. 'At school we don't learn very much about Germany other than the first half of the 20th century. Very few people have studied Germany after 1945, and even fewer since 1989. This is the

newest country in Europe and now the most powerful, economically and politically. We need to understand it more.'

The exhibition is timed for the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November. But the relevance is much more contemporary, going to the heart of debates in Britain about how power should be shared among the UK's home nations and in a dysfunctional Europe.

The lesson of the exhibition is that German history is not about one man seizing all power into his hands but centuries of decentralized authority.

'The fundamental narrative of Germany has been of dispersed power – sharing power across different parts of the country and with different organizations,' he says. 'It is also absolutely clear that Germany thinks of itself entirely in a European context.'

There is a political point here: if Europe is going to be led, then surely it is best if it is done by a country which knows about dispersed power. MacGregor will not follow the thought to its conclusion. 'That's for others to decide.'

As Westminster struggles to cope with Scottish nationalism and English Euroscepticism, there is much for Britain to learn from Germany. 'The British government and parliament have a long tradition of the exclusive exercise of power,' he notes. 'Germany has a tradition of knowing there





are other centres of real power with which it works easily and comfortably?’

One of the goals of the exhibition is to revive the memory of pre-1914 Germany, which was Europe’s cultural and intellectual hub. After two world wars, very few British people read German.

Such an approach may raise some atavistic feelings, while others will be looking for any sign that the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jewish people has been whitewashed.

Visitors will find grotesque German anti-Semitic posters, children’s cut-out figures of the Nazi party saluting Hitler and a look at the Buchenwald concentration camp. They will also find other artefacts from the Communist dictatorship of East Germany, which collapsed only 25 years ago.

But the exhibition points up the less well-known aspects of history. Everyone has heard of the Iron Cross, and most would associate it with German militarism. Yet the medal was established in 1813 when the Prussian state had to fight Napoleon and Germany was going through a period of austerity – one much more egalitarian than our own.

A medal awarded to all ranks, it was proudly made of base metal. To pay for the defeat of Napoleon, ladies at the Prussian court handed in their jewellery and received in return a plain iron necklace, stamped with the words ‘I sold gold for iron’. This egalitarian principle returned later in the century when Prussia established the



Bauhaus and a spirit of subtle resistance

Two items from the exhibition tell revealing stories about life in Germany in the 20th Century. Both have a link to the Weimar School of Architecture and Design, called the Bauhaus, which pioneered modern design in the 1920s. Because of its socialist and internationalist outlook, the Nazis set out to destroy it.

The first item is a ceramic vase, above, by Greta Marks. Displaying African influences, it is a striking piece even today. Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, singled it out as ‘decadent art’. Marks fled to Britain and continued working but never again found the inspiration of her early work.

The second is the inscription *Jedem das Seine* – to each his due – on the gate of Buchenwald concentration camp, where many Jews and communists were incarcerated, including two prime ministers of France, and 56,000 people died. Unlike the more famous inscription on the gate at Auschwitz, this one faces inwards and was designed to be seen by prisoners every day. The wording is one of the fundamental principles of Roman law. The Nazis subverted it to show that it was they – not university intellectuals – who decided



who got their just deserts.

Intriguingly, the typeface is a product of Bauhaus design. It was made by a camp inmate, the communist architect Franz Ehrlich, who was imprisoned on a charge of treason in 1934. The font displayed what MacGregor calls ‘a spirit of subtle resistance’, which the inmates understood to mean that one day the Nazis would get justice.

Ehrlich was set free in 1939 and, uniquely for a communist, allowed to work through the Nazi period. At the end of the war he was fêted as a hero in the East Germany. The story of how he negotiated life with two kinds of tyrannical regime does not end there, however.

‘We find the story of Ehrlich the good communist moving. But when the Stasi archives were opened, it emerged that he’d been a very energetic informant – and one of a very disagreeable sort,’ says MacGregor. ‘This is a story that makes me extremely glad not to have been German at that time.’

beginnings of the welfare state, including the first old age pension.

It is hard not to be caught up with the director’s enthusiasm as he delves into Germany’s history. Using Gutenberg’s Bible, he portrays Mainz in southern Germany as the start-up capital of the world in the 15th century.

All the skills and connections were there – advanced metallurgy to make the revolutionary movable type, wine presses to provide the model for the first printing press, and the Frankfurt fair, where Gutenberg could order high quality paper from Italy for delivery every six months.

Most important, there was a large literate population linked by the trade network of German rivers which ensured he could make a profit. ‘You have an unusually high concentration of courts, each of them with their own bureaucracy. So you have the public to support a growing book market. There was nowhere else in Europe with that concentration of cities linked by trade routes and rivers.’

MacGregor raises his voice in irritation only once, when I suggest that the British Museum – ‘the world in one place’ – can be seen abroad as an imperial venture, showing Britain’s dominance of the world, rather than an attempt to understand it.

‘No, imperialism was a later phenomenon,’ he responds. ‘The museum’s collection

starts around the 1710s and 1720s. The collection embodies a pre-imperial idea of understanding, for two reasons. First is so that you can trade with the world, but if you compare different societies, you can get a better idea of your own. So above all it’s about tolerance.

‘The major worry for any government in the early 18th century was how you stop civil war on the basis of religion. One of the best ways is to look at other religions and then see there’s no one true way. The point of this collection is to show that we all do the same thing in different ways and there’s no best way.’

If you want to see a ‘trophy museum’, the place to look is the Louvre which is about the state and France’s place in the Mediterranean world. The British Museum, he insists, is about the citizen and it is ‘the private collection of everyone’.

What’s next after Germany? An exploration of Australia through Aboriginal eyes, using the Museum’s early and well-documented collection of Aboriginal material. This exhibition is being organized jointly with the National Museum in Canberra with the engagement of indigenous people, as part of Australia’s attempt to renegotiate its relationship with the past... ‘another piece of history that we need’.

‘Germany: Memories of a Nation’ is on at the British Museum until January 2015 and will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 through October