

Gabriele Rossi Lemeni Makedon

The Rhine in European History

1 May 2016

### The Rhine in European History

Germany is a country with a long and tumultuous history which has shaped it into the central European power that it is today. In particular, the region surrounding the river Rhine has been a cradle of civilization for millennia and has affected the cultures surrounding it significantly throughout the years. While on the program “The Rhine in European History” I had the opportunity to visit incredible cities such as Frankfurt, Mainz, Bonn, Cologne, and Leverkusen. During my time abroad I learned several new things about Germany’s history as well as its current politics and operating structure which have considerably changed my opinions on current affairs.

One of the topics I was most ignorant about and was able to acquire the most knowledge of was the political system of Germany and its conception. Our first destination on the program was the city of Frankfurt. While there, we had the privilege of visiting the famous Paulskirche, or St. Paul’s Church, a site of notable historical importance for the German government. In 1848, St. Paul’s Church was the meeting place for the Frankfurt Parliament which was the first democratically elected legislative body of Germany and drafted the first constitution that would have served as a governing document for a united Germany. However, the Prussian King Frederick William IV refused to adopt it, and instead used his power to

influence the dissolution of the Frankfurt parliament and return Germany to a divided state.

However, thanks to this effort Frankfurt and more specifically the Paulskirche is often considered to be the birthplace of German democracy, an important title for what is today the financial capital of the country hosting such buildings as the headquarters of the European Central Bank as well as several skyscrapers belonging to numerous public and private financial entities. Nowadays, the German political system is considered a federal parliamentary republic, with a federal governing body called the Bundestag and an aggregation of representatives from the regional states called the Bundesrat.

Another historically interesting stop during our German excursion was the city of Bonn, which during the period following the fall of the Third Reich until 1990 was considered the temporary capital of West Germany while Berlin was being contested with the Soviets. Because of its newfound yet relatively short-lived role, Bonn saw the construction of several important federal buildings among which one of the most significant is probably what is now the former residence of the Federal Chancellor, who resided there during its time as capital and is now open as a museum. Although the mansion was built with an architecture intended to be an antithesis of the typical grandeur expected from central government buildings and residences of heads of state, it still distinguishes itself thanks to the usage of luxurious materials and a modern look. While the private residence is now unused by the government, the Palais Schaumburg on the same property is still considered the secondary official seat of the federal parliament.

Additionally, we had the rare opportunity of seeing what the past several centuries of political revolutions resulted into by meeting and interacting with several members of the Rhineland-Palatinate parliament in its state capital of Mainz. While talking with representatives from the three leading political parties, namely Carsten Pörksen for the SPD, Gunther Heinisch for the Greens, and Hans-Josef Bracht for the CDU, our group was given an inside view of the different opinions held by party members and their views on current affairs in their state as well as Germany as a whole. One of the more interesting conversations was regarding the recent European immigrant crisis and the German view of their ability to accept more refugees. While there were some differences in opinions, most notably between the Greens-SPD alliance and the Christian Democratic Union, there was a general disagreement with the extremist rhetoric put forward by the recently formed right-wing party Alternative for Germany, and all three representatives agreed that while some changes should be made, the country had the resources to accept more refugees and should not turn away from its welcoming policies.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing social aspects of German culture that I noticed while on the study abroad program was the dedication from the state as well as private entities to keep the atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis during the Holocaust very much alive in the memories of the public and visiting tourists. While visiting Frankfurt we stopped to visit the former headquarters of chemistry giant IG-Farben, which is currently the main building of the University of Frankfurt. This landmark is significant because, as the plaques outside the main entrance explain, IG-Farben was the company responsible for producing the

cyanide-based poisonous gas pesticide named Zyklon B which was infamously used in Hitler's gas chambers as an execution method for the extermination of millions of people. In addition, we were able to visit the Wollheim Memorial, a small building outside the main university complex that houses a screen where one can study a number of testimonials from Holocaust survivors, a chilling reminder of what happened in that region under the rule of Adolf Hitler.

During our last days near the Rhine, we sojourned in Cologne where, among other destinations, we had a guided tour of the Römisch-Germanisches Museum, which was an exciting insight towards Germany's ancient past. At the time, the settlement of Colonia was one of the largest Roman establishments north of the Alps and carried significant importance as the capital of the Roman province of Germania Inferior. In addition to its classical roots, we also explored the city's more modern history and cultural aspects via the Kölnisches Stadtmuseum, where the group was able to learn about the growth of the city starting from the Middle Ages and also about some interesting facts regarding local culture, including the specific Köln beer and its customary drinking vessel as well as the tradition of fragrance manufacturing started in the city. Finally, we briefly departed from Cologne in order to visit Leverkusen, which houses the factories and laboratories of a plethora of chemical companies, all hosted by the pharmaceutical giant Bayer AG. It was extremely fascinating to see how organized this industrial city complex is, fully stocked with its own private fire station as well as railroad terminal. Furthermore, Bayer instituted one of the oldest company archives in the country, where one can learn about their history and several of their commercial successes, such as

their early commercialization of heroin as well as their discovery of acetylsalicylic acid, which is commonly known as aspirin and which earned the Bayer scientist who discovered it a Nobel Prize.

Ultimately, the study abroad program exploring the Rhine region and its role in the shaping of European history was an incredibly enriching experience. Having had the privilege of visiting such historically charged sites as the Paulskirche, the former IG Farben headquarters and the former residence of the Federal Chancellor, as well as being able to interact with leading members of the regional government of the Rhineland Palatinate, exploring the history of a gargantuan chemical company such as Bayer, and learning about Germany's history via well-organized museums, I can definitely say that my previously limited knowledge of German history and political affairs has been significantly augmented, and it was remarkable to observe how the Rhine river has played a part in shaping what is today arguably the most influential country in continental Europe.