Introduction

Setting the Stage

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On the first day of October 1946 an Old Boy of New College, Oxford and a Heidelberg graduate faced each other for the last time in the court room of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. The former, Geoffrey Lawrence, the presiding judge, had found the latter guilty of having planned, initiated, and waged wars of aggression and other crimes against peace; of having committed war crimes; and of having participated in crimes against humanity. Lawrence told him: "Defendant Wilhelm Frick, on the counts of the Indictment on which you have been convicted, the International Military Tribunal sentences you to death by hanging." Sixteen days later Hitler's former minister of the interior was dead. Before Wilhelm Frick was hooded on his way to the gallows, he had shouted "Long live eternal Germany," showing no remorse for his deeds. What has astounded observers ever since Hitler came to power in 1933 is that the country that had prided itself as being the most educated country in the world and whose universities had been the envy of the world had unleashed war and genocide on an unprecedented level. Despite Hitler's own lack of higher education, an astonishing number of Nazi leaders were products of the German higher education system. In total, fifteen of the twenty-four defendants at Nuremberg had attended university or teacher's college, and at least three were sons of teachers. Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, like Frick, held a law doctorate from Heidelberg University. Furthermore, a huge fencing scar, dating from his days in a dueling student corporation in Graz, ran across the face of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the highest SS official still alive and like Frick and Krupp a doctor of law. The other British judge at Nuremberg, Norman Birkett, meanwhile, had been president of the Cambridge Union at pre-1914 Cambridge, while the British prosecutor, David Maxwell Fyfe, had been at Balliol, Oxford from 1917. Another member of the

prosecuting team was G. D. "Khaki" Roberts. Rather than slashing his face in a student duel in the style of some of the Nazi war criminals, "Khaki" Roberts had earned his fame as an undergraduate at St. John's, Oxford between 1905 and 1908 in a team sport. He had played Rugby for both Oxford and England.[1]

The biographies of the British legal team and of the majority of the defendants at Nuremberg thus make it tempting to imagine that Europe's civil war with its conflict between Nazism and Western democracy had been coming for a long time and that British and German universities had produced many of the prime protagonists in this conflict. Yet the contention of this book is that at least the pre-1914 differences between the two countries—at a time when most of the protagonists of the Second World War attended either school or university—can neither sufficiently or even prominently explain the differences between Germany and Britain after 1933 nor why Europe collapsed in 1914. This book, which uses the cases of two elite universities—Oxford and Heidelberg—takes aim at both the paradigms of British and German exceptionalisms. Yet readers tired of arguments about the *Sonderweg*—the idea that, as it modernized, Germany had taken a distinctly different path from the West, ultimately leading to Auschwitz—or Whiggish interpretations of British history need not put the book aside at this point, as *Our Friend "The Enemy"* does not try to refight historiographical battles of the past.

First, this book raises the question of what the implications of the contention that Britain and Germany were much more similar than they were different are for our understanding of the pre-1914 world. It does not give too much away to acknowledge that while Oxford and Heidelberg had many dark and troubling sides, this book ultimately proposes that there was little at the two places to suggest that European society at the end of the long nineteenth century was fatally flawed and a cataclysmic reorganization was imminent. The question here is how stable or unstable life at Oxford and Heidelberg was before the First World War and how stasis and change interacted.

Second, the approach of this book is both comparative and transnational. The book examines how national and transnational identities overlapped among British and German elites in the era before 1914 and produced a sense of European identity that was very different from the Europeanization of the post-1945 period and yet provided Europe with a fragile stability. This book asks if the approach we have commonly used to study pre-1914 history has prevented us from recognizing that cosmopolitan nationalists were a more common species than hitherto believed. We will see that, two weeks before the outbreak of war in 1914, the British students at Heidelberg could think of no other struggle with German students than that in a forthcoming rowing regatta.

"We guarantee," they would write, "to give our friend 'the enemy' a hard row for his money."[2]

Third, this book is as much about the way we study history as it is about Oxford and Heidelberg. The argument here is that the lenses we have tended to use to look at the pre-1914 world have distorted our view and knowledge of the past, amplifying conflict, tension, and differences, thus largely ignoring opposing development. In other words, the contention is that far too many historical studies have taken the Second World War and the Third Reich as the starting point to explain pre-1914 history and have thus distorted history.[3] This trend has been amplified by an earlier attempt to explain the pre-1914 era, when the First World War was taken as the starting point to make sense of the decades before August 1914. Hence, we have all too often seen a teleological reduction of pre-1914 history.

Finally, this is, at the very least, a book about two of the world's greatest and most fascinating universities. It brings back the pre-1914 life in Heidelberg's and Oxford's cobblestone lanes, colleges, corporations, and lecture halls of a generation whose lives were shattered in the era of the two world wars.

In its approach, the book cuts across the political, cultural, social, intellectual, national, transnational, and international history divide. It does not rely on one approach but transcends the heavily fortified and labeled borders of the profession for two reasons: first, because it examines the methods that have been applied to British and German history and, second, because of the interwoven reality of life, it is more interested in combining different approaches than in applying one approach at the expense of another.

I

What has been the history of the views of British and German exceptionalisms? Debates about British history have not been channeled quite as prominently through one single question as is the case, as we shall see, of the German Sonderweg. Yet most debates ultimately fall on either side of two arguments: one over British decline in the twentieth century[4] and the other about British exceptionalism. The original version of the latter argument was the Whiggish interpretation of history. It had as its theme the constant unfolding of reform, liberalism, and gradual improvement first in England and then in Britain. Its name referred to the political party of aristocratic reform in post–civil war England, but it had its heyday between the times of Thomas Macaulay in the first half of the nineteenth century and the days of his great nephew G. M. Trevelyan

a century later. In its original form, Whig history was the history of the evolution of the constitution of England and the United Kingdom and its institutions.[5] It has mutated considerably over time, and in its more recent incarnation it may be more fitting to speak of British exceptionalism. The term *Whiggish interpretation* has, at any rate, always been used more by its critics than its practitioners. This book uses the term *British exceptionalism* as an undogmatic short key for interpretations that believe in liberal and positive peculiarities that set the course of British history apart from the European continent.

The next generation of historians after the demise of the original Whiggish interpretation was dominated by Ludwik Bernstein Niemirowski and Gottfried Rudolph Ehrenberg. The two adored England the way probably only immigrants and émigrés could. As Lewis Namier and G. R. Elton, they sought to explain why their new country provided a haven from the left-wing and right-wing extremism that had gained currency on the European continent. However, Whiggish interpretations were increasingly challenged. The most famous salvo against the interpretation had already been fired in 1931 by Herbert Butterfield who had criticized the tendency of historians of Britain "to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present."[6] Butterfield criticized the historical professions for using the lenses of the present to look at the past, for selecting and rejecting facts from the past to fit their argument, in other words to teleologically reduce the past. Whole generations of historians started to critically study the British past ranging from Anglo-Marxists such as Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, or E. P. Thompson to the cultural and gender historians of today. Along the way, a number of young British left-wing and liberal historians critical of Britain's past, including Geoff Eley, David Blackbourn, and Richard Evans, were drawn toward studying German history when they realized that the German Sonderweg historians of the 1970s used as their point of reference an idealized version of British history in which few historians of Britain still believed. Furthermore, since the winds of change had blown the British Empire away, postcolonial historians have also been less than congratulatory toward British history. Finally, the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism has given rise to a movement that has portrayed the history of Britain as the history of English imperialism and oppression.

Yet as recent debates about the British Empire show,[7] arguments about British exceptionalism have never died. Many historians,[8] but in particular the disciples of J. H. Plumb, who himself had been a student

of Trevelyan, have resurrected a less damning view of British history and sometimes also a belief in British exceptionalism, arguing that, in comparison to existing alternatives, Britain had moved more often than not in the right direction.[9] In that sense, they are the heirs of the Whig historians. However, in their approach—namely, to judge the past by the standards of the past and also to face the darker sides of Britain's past—they stand more in the tradition of Butterfield.

The view of German exceptionalism has been, if anything, even more resilient. The history of the Sonderweg over the last three decades is perhaps best summarized under the motto "The Sonderweg is dead, long live the Sonderweg." Every time it is pronounced dead, the idea that the German peculiarities of the long nineteenth century are pivotal in explaining the rise of Nazism is immediately reaffirmed by someone in a slightly mutated form. What changes in new incarnations of the Sonderweg is primarily the explanatory model behind the general idea of a divergence of Germany and the West.

The original Sonderweg interpretation goes back to nationalist historians in the last third of the nineteenth century and, in a slightly modified form, to apologist German historians of the interwar period. The latter argued that German history had taken a superior path but had been knocked off the track by the imagined double assault of Germany's foreign enemies during the First World War and of left-wing and democratic "traitors" who had supposedly stabbed Germany in the back at the end of the war. The Sonderweg in its modern negative incarnation was developed by social historians in the 1970s who used modernization theory to explain why Germany had been different from the West. The core of the argument was that, unlike the West, Germany had industrialized but not modernized. This was purportedly evident in the fact that the German middle classes (the *Bürgertum*) had been marginalized and feudalized. The discussion of the Sonderweg had thus necessarily always been—at least implicitly—comparative, and in its modern form has generally focused on Britain. As a response to this interpretation that became the new orthodoxy, David Blackbourn (another of Plumb's disciples), Geoff Eley, and many others criticized that proponents of the Sonderweg interpretation had applied an asymmetrical perspective toward German and British history, scrutinizing the German development and contrasting it relatively uncritically with an idealized counterfactual version of the West, and in particular of Britain. The critics of the Sonderweg also argued that the middle classes had, in fact, modernized and achieved a silent revolution.[10]

By the second half of the 1990s even many of the protagonists of the original 1970's Sonderweg at the Bielefeld School of History had come

to acknowledge that the German bourgeoisie indeed had not been as weak and as premodern as had been argued previously.[11] Proponents and critics of the original interpretation alike now proclaimed the death of the Sonderweg.[12] However, what they meant was really something rather different. While the latter meant that Germany was no more (and no less) special than any other country until 1914, the former simply implied that the explanation of the different path of German history had relied too heavily on modernization theory. For them the idea that the differences between Germany and the West in the long nineteenth century made the two world wars likely is still alive and well, though in a slightly different reincarnated form.

In a 1998 article, discussing what is left of the Sonderweg, Jürgen Kocka identified the weakness of liberal parties, the existence of an illiberal political culture and of a strong authoritarian state, the strong role of militarism in state and society, a blocked process of parliamentarization, and the role of elites as some of the elements that had caused a fundamental German divergence from the West in which Kocka continues to believe.[13] In the two latest installments of his multivolume history of modern Germany, Hans-Ulrich Wehler equally reaffirmed the notion of a divergence of German history and pointed to the continuities between Germany before and after the First World War; the inability of Imperial Germany to reform; and imperialism, extremism, anti-Semitism, and illiberalism particularly among university students.[14] Similarly, the first volume of Heinrich August Winkler's semiofficial[15] *Der Lange Weg nach Westen* (*The Long Road West*), published in German in 2000 and in English in 2006,[16] illustrates that the view of an essential difference between Germany and the West in the pre-1914 period had indeed not died.[17]

In recent years the conceptualization of the Sonderweg has taken a cultural turn. The emphasis now lies on the social construction of a German identity that was purportedly more extreme than any other European counterpart in its construction of internal and external enemies, its rigidity of gender boundaries, and its worship of war, thus giving rise to Nazism and triggering two world wars.[18] Another potential reincarnation of the Sonderweg is the view, which has gained currency lately, that a German way of waging war had evolved since the 1870s. This view is said to be visible in instances of colonial violence and the treatment of noncombatants in the First World War which supposedly set Germany apart from other European countries and constituted a *conditio sine qua non* for the evolution of the German war of annihilation against Jews and Slavs in the Second World War.[19] Volker Berghahn recently remarked that the controversy over the German Sonderweg "is

still rumbling on, and given its enormous implications I wonder if it will ever be resolved . . . it may well be that no historian of modern Germany will ever escape being slotted on one side of the divide or the other."[20]

II

Every work of history that asserts national exceptionalisms is necessarily, at least implicitly, comparative in character. As a wave of works over the past decade or two has realized,[21] the best way to test what is (and what is not) specific about different national histories is thus by means of comparative history. Yet comparative history did not take off as much as enthusiastic supporters of comparative approaches had once hoped. Not too much has changed since the American historian Raymond Grew remarked in 1980 that "for many professional historians comparative history study evokes the ambivalence of a good bourgeois toward the best wines: to appreciate them is a sign of good taste, but indulgence seems a little loose and wasteful."[22] The first book in English about the methodology of comparative history only appeared in 2004.[23] Even the Bielefeld historians, the world's most enthusiastic supporters of comparative history, concluded in 2000 that in practice even in their own school they had not found as many converts to comparative history as they had once envisaged.[24]

Where comparative history exists, it still often limits itself to "cosmopolitan gestures"[25] and an uncritical contrasting of the results of research on two different countries (or phenomena) without contrasting the way those results have been arrived at. Often studies fail to see that apparent differences between historical phenomena really result from differences in the conceptualization and research of those phenomena.[26] The worst examples of this kind of (asymmetrical) comparative history can be found in conclusions of monographs or concluding paragraphs of chapters within monographs on any one country.

Jürgen Kocka has pointed out that an asymmetrical comparative perspective is certainly not as fruitful as an outright systematic comparison. Nevertheless, he has argued that it is difficult to escape asymmetrical comparisons and that a perspective of that kind is better than no comparison at all.[27] However, as this book demonstrates, asymmetrical comparisons have often been carried out with a lack of caution. While the application of an asymmetrical comparative perspective gives the impression of a comparative approach, it, in fact, tends to reproduce and seemingly confirm existing stereotypes. By contrast, *Our Friend "The Enemy"* carries out comparative history in a double sense. It poses

general questions and then applies the approach which has been used by the historiography for one country to the historiography of the other.[28] It tries, in the words of John Breuilly, to "show that apparently different events can be related to similar conditions, which means that those conditions cannot be related to differences of events."[29] After demonstrating how the British and German national historiographies have produced differing national images for the variables under examination, this book applies one uniform combined approach to each variable. In other words, it applies the approach which has been used within the context of one national history to the other national history. When this is done, many of the perceived differences between the two countries dissolve.

Recently, comparative history has come under attack. "Comparative history is 'out,' . . . for it suggests artificial boundaries between societies," says one historian.[30] Comparative history "reif[ies] the very category that it set out to transcend," says another historian.[31] The way to solve this problem for the two historians is to examine transnational developments, in other words, "relations and constellations, which transcend national boundaries."[32]

This reasoning is based on the erroneous assumption that if you compare you will always assert and stress differences. This book shows that applying a comparative approach reveals the flawed methodology that has often been applied to British and German history and amplified national differences. Hence, both the comparative chapters of the book and the chapter on Anglo-German life at the two universities serve to bring to light transnational developments[33] among the British and German elites before 1914.

If it is true that most of the differences between British and German elites are not real but were imagined by historians, what does that then mean for our understanding of the world before 1914? It is a strong indicator that the comparison of elites at Oxford and Heidelberg is not a comparison of two independent instances but, in the words of Charles Maier, "of one over-arching ideal type exemplified in different places."[34] That ideal type here consists of the possibly rather similar responses of elites to the modernization of, or—for readers who no longer believe in the usefulness of "modernization" theory—to the rapid changes of life in Britain and Germany.

Volker Berghahn has recently called upon us to think harder about how the cultural and social histories that have been produced in recent years bring us closer to explaining how the world got into the First World War.[35] If the responses in different European countries to the changes that European modernity was bringing were drastically different, as the conventional view has often assumed, we can explain quite

easily how national differences and antagonism grew and how Europe thus got into the First World War. That war broke out over the July crisis was, of course, not inevitable, and it was contingent on the handling of the crisis by policy makers. However, the different cultural mentalities of Britain and Germany would have made a clash of cultures sooner or later likely. Historians who have redefined national exceptionalisms in cultural terms and also stress the collective psychoses of Germans, Britons, and Europeans about crises and decline thus, maybe unintentionally, do not stand too far apart from Samuel Huntington's concept of "the clash of civilizations." According to the concept, civilizations are cultural entities, and a combination of a growing consciousness of cultural separateness and of crises will lead to a clash of civilizations.[36]

If, however, that difference in mentalities did not exist, we have got to explain how stable or unstable European society as a whole was. In his recent book on why the First World War broke out, David Fromkin described pre-1914 Europe as "a torn, conflicted world caught up in the grip of an arms race that one might well have called suicidal."[37] Similarly, according to Volker Berghahn, European society as a whole was fatally flawed. War broke out in 1914 primarily because of decisions taken in Berlin and Vienna during the July crisis. However, that those decisions could lead to war was only possible, according to Berghahn, because European society, from capital cities to small villages, from Britain to Germany, from France to Russia, had been dominated by European "men of violence" who worshipped militarism. European history, for him, has to be understood not as the clash of British liberalism and German chauvinism but as the contrast between European martial society and a peaceful and civil American mass consumer culture.[38]

The interpretation Berghahn is offering us here is thus one of a dichotomy between European militarist society and American civil society and one between a pre-1945 Europe of violent antagonisms and a post-1945 Europeanization[39] with the gradual dissolution of nation states. This book raises the question of whether European society can really be understood using these binary opposites. Were national and transnational identities mutually exclusive concepts? Did nationalizing tendencies run opposite to transnational tendencies? Or was a marriage of transnational and national identities before 1914 more common than we have hitherto thought? Had the time of cosmopolitan nationalists really passed by the early twentieth century, as Berghahn suggests?[40] Or did British and German elite identities coexist with a European or Western identity? This book contends that at least the cases examined here suggest that the overarching characteristic was not one of an emerging clash of nations and of instability but one of fragile stability.

III

How can a comparative and transnational study of universities contribute to a reassessment of British and German exceptionalisms and of European stability? If we understand elite universities not so much as places of academic research but first and foremost as institutions that groomed the political, administrative, and social elite of a country, comparing elite universities means comparing the class that ultimately took decisions over war and peace and that defined inclusion and exclusion in the nation and the state. Moreover, as Geoff Eley and James Retallack have suggested, the defenders of German exceptionalism have allowed that German society as a whole might have been more dynamic than previously assumed but retreated to the core area of political power and political institutions, stressing the "backwardness of the Imperial state . . . and the unreformability of its practices."[41] If differences existed anywhere, they should have thus been visible where the people who manned political institutions of power were trained and formed. Indeed Konrad Jarausch has argued that liberal forces at German universities were too weak and could not counter the rise of anti-Semitism, anti-Socialism, and imperialism, the result being academic illiberalism.[42] This is a view to which Wehler returns repeatedly in his recent work.[43] Likewise, if European society was unstable and fatally flawed, it should be visible in the comparison and interaction of the political, governing, and administrative elites of Britain and Germany.

For Ralf Dahrendorf, the traditional university was indeed "one of the most formative institutions of history."[44] Besides academic research in which universities were potentially a threat to the state, universities had a second role: the training and forming of leaders. It is in this task that the university was closely linked to the state authority:

Universities perform part of the task of socializing individuals with which educational institutions (among others) are entrusted. In universities, the skills for certain specialized professions, and sometimes the general qualifications for leadership as well, are imparted. In tasks of this kind, the university is . . . tied to and bound by the values and ruling powers of the time, that is, it is close to the "needs of the state." From this perspective the social structure of the university has, in principle, the same drop of authority that characterizes schools and armies, churches and business enterprises; in this side of their activity, universities are essentially conservative institutions.[45]

Similarly, Hans-Ulrich Wehler has argued that "in social and political terms . . . the universities remained bulwarks of the status quo and merely perpetuated the social structure and the social power relations

of Imperial Germany."[46] Others have argued that Britain as well as Germany possessed a "hierarchical system of education that tended to reproduce and fortify the class and status structure of society,"[47] while John Scott has pointed to the growing power of the elite educational institutions (Oxford, Cambridge, and the public schools) as "self-recruiting and self-perpetuating institutions composed of men recruited from the establishment."[48] According to these views, universities then produced policy makers and reproduced the establishment and its values of their states.

Who formed the elite? In the broadest sense, modern sociology defines elites as those persons who have outstanding qualifications, have made extraordinary achievements, or exert special influence in a society, in a political system, or in an institution.[49] This definition includes on the one side cultural and intellectual elites and on the other what political theory terms as "functional elites": leadership groups which have special functions of command, coordination, or planning and thus stand under formalized responsibility,[50] or in plain English governing, political, administrative, economic, and military elites. For the purpose of this book, we are primarily concerned with "functional" elites and particularly with governing, political, and administrative elites. I have used the term in an inclusive way, including those whose function or whose social class had given them political influence. We will look primarily at students from elite families and students whose post-Oxford and Heidelberg careers gave them political influence but also at academics insofar as they acted as more than merely intellectual elites.

What this book necessarily does not look at are military elites. In Germany, as in Britain, the path to the nation's military elite normally did not lead via universities. The case of Douglas Haig who had attended Brasenose College, Oxford before entering Sandhurst was the exception, not the rule. Officers in both countries attended officer schools rather than universities. However, British officers had normally attended the same public schools as Oxford students.[51] In addition, the influence of the army varied greatly in the two countries because of the privileged constitutional power of the German military and of the Ministry of War.[52] Yet as we shall see in an analysis of educational backgrounds of Wilhelmine senior ministers in Chapter 1 of this book, the importance of military institutions for the education of the civil Imperial elite should not be overrated. Nor should we overestimate the importance of technical universities for the education of the country's civil elite.[53]

We shall see in more detail in Chapter 1 to what degree Oxford and Heidelberg produced the civil political, governing, and administrative elite of their countries. The chapter sets out to establish how far Oxford

and Heidelberg differed in their structures and how a comparison of the two universities can shed light on the broad questions raised in this book. It concludes with a comparison of the forms student life took at the two universities.

Chapter 2 tells the story of Anglo-German life at Oxford and Heidelberg. It raises the question of whether the classic conceptualization of Anglo-German antagonism has used a binary model which has allowed only the labeling of people as either exclusively politically anti-German/anti-British or pro-German/pro-British and has thus led historians to exaggerate the importance of Anglo-German antagonism. It asks whether attempts to counter Anglo-German antagonism did, in the German case, really only originate in liberal and socialist critics of the German government; or whether it is more appropriate to characterize the students involved in Anglo-German life at Oxford and Heidelberg as cosmopolitan nationalists close to the British political establishment and von Bethmann Hollweg's government; in other words as students for whom a national and transnational European identity was no contradiction.

Chapter 3 naturally follows from the discussion of Anglo-German antagonism and tackles the core of Berghahn's argument about European society before 1914: the nexus between militarism and nationalism. The chapter investigates the difference between the most popular pastimes of Oxford college students and Heidelberg corporation students—rowing and student duels—and what their involvement in military and paramilitary organizations tells us about the degree to which Oxford and Heidelberg were martial societies. It challenges the idea that British militarism was a response to German aggression. Finally, it asks whether Oxford's and Heidelberg's militarism was mutually antagonistic and whether it was a source of stability or instability.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover areas to which historical research has prominently moved since the advent of the "new cultural history" (and since the Holocaust moved to the center of historical interest in the 1990s): the inclusion and exclusion of groups from dominant society and the nation, the establishment of hierarchies as the central feature of what constituted the nation; in other words, the study of gender, sexuality, and the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. Chapter 4 deals with student sexuality at Oxford and Heidelberg, Chapter 5 with women's emancipation, and Chapter 6 with Jews and foreigners. (For reasons of space, I am focusing in this book primarily on Jews rather than also prominently including Catholics.) The chapters discuss cultural practices and then follow the career paths particularly of Jews and women to test whether the degrees of success of women and Jews support the view that

German, British, and European society before 1914 is best described in terms of a continued exclusion of anybody but white Protestant males. Or is it more appropriate to say that Oxford and Heidelberg, Britain and Germany, and Europe were moving toward greater equality and emancipation?

This book covers life at Oxford and Heidelberg at the end of a long era of change. To us—as well as to visitors at the time—life at the two ancient universities that had existed since the Middle Ages might easily appear as quaint and unchanging. In fact, life at Oxford and Cambridge in 1914 was more different from what it had been at the beginning of the long nineteenth century in 1789 than the change that happened in any comparable period, including our own. In 1789, the experience of speed was still unbeknown to humanity. If students wanted to get from Oxford and Heidelberg to London and Berlin, they had a long journey in a carriage, on horseback, or by foot through a world of villages ahead of them. Most rivers had to be crossed by ferries. Students had to study by candlelight. By 1914 all that had changed.

Students now lived in cities and universities illuminated by electricity. From Oxford and Heidelberg, they could get by train anywhere within the borders of their countries in a matter of hours. As they sped home during university vacations, they raced past seas of chimneys, industrial complexes, housing estates, and urban sprawl. The first motor cars had started to appear in the two cities. If students wanted to get around town, they increasingly used their own bikes (even though bikes were less popular in Heidelberg than in Oxford.) And if students wanted to get their portrait taken, they could go to a photographer. In shops they could buy mass-produced commodities, and they could watch movies in cinemas. The rich ones could use telephones or buy typewriters. Students could follow news events anywhere in the world within hours or days of occurrence. Medieval college buildings all over Oxford had been torn down throughout the nineteenth century. At Heidelberg, many fires over the centuries had obliterated all but a handful of medieval buildings anyway. To be sure, in place of the torn-down buildings, Oxford colleges and the central universities erected, more often than not, neo-Gothic buildings or other buildings full of spires, but these were seen as symbols of the party of reform at Oxford.[54] Amidst these changes, the social order had also been challenged. The universities were still very small compared to today but compared to an earlier age, they had been swamped by middle- and lower-class students, women, and foreigners who were all symbols of the changes that not just the two universities but Europe as a whole had to face. The old elites had lost all certainties and often did not know how to navigate through these new times.

   Historians have often reminded us that the changes described here—in other words, the social and political implications of modernization and industrialization—caused a deep crisis. With regard to Oxford and Cambridge, Paul Deslandes speaks of a "pervasive culture of uncertainty, anxiety, and instability that marked the tumultuous decades around the turn of the century." In those crises, says Deslandes, traditional elites tried to defend the boundaries of the status quo as they recast the way they kept their hegemony. Student rituals and traditions reinforced new insider/outsider distinctions which were aimed at keeping elite status in a changing world. Students defined themselves in opposition to women, religious dissenters, nonwhites, and the working class, culturally constructing their superiority. The invasion of female and foreign students reminded undergraduates that Britain's strong imperial position and its supremacy over other countries was unstable.[55] Male students in Britain, Carol Dyhouse tells us, were displaying "siege mentalities."[56] Patrica Mazón, meanwhile, speaks of a deep crisis in German universities caused by widened access, the influx of women and foreign students, and anxieties about overcrowding and academic standards.[57] Others speak about an Edwardian crisis or of the Wilhelmine era as a "nervous" age.[58] Recently, David Blackbourn remarked that "the more we learn, the more the unstable hybridity and ambiguity of the Kaiserreich is underlined,"[59] while Volker Berghahn argued that the perception of the existence of a deep-seated crisis before 1914 is pivotal in explaining the behavior of individuals and groups, both domestically and in foreign relations.[60] Two years after the completion of the dissertation upon which this book is based, Sonja Levsen defended a PhD dissertation on Cambridge and Tübingen students before and after the First World War, also stressing the gender crisis in prewar Britain and Germany.[61]

   That a crisis was widely felt at Oxford and Heidelberg and in Britain and Germany is beyond question. More contentious is the question of whether Oxford and Heidelberg were incapable of embracing or at least of absorbing change. Were elites worshipping stasis, and was the European civil war of 1914 to 1945 an apocalyptical attempt by elites to keep the status quo? Or was reform accepted as a "reluctant response to stasis rather than a ringing endorsement of change"?[62] Or had reformers at both Oxford and Heidelberg won the day by 1914? Our verdict on attitudes among elites toward change at Oxford and Heidelberg is thus central to judging how stable or unstable life in Britain and Germany was on the eve of the First World War.