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Germany is taking on a growing role in global diplomacy.

HISTORY 718

From Germanic tribes and the Holy Roman Empire to fairy-tale kings and modern horrors, we chart 2000 years of history.

THE GERMAN PEOPLE 736

More than 25 years after reunification, Germany has become one of Europe's most multicultural nations.

FOOD & DRINK 740

Famed for the almighty sausage, black forest gâteau and outstanding beers, local gastronomic delights are hard to beat.

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Germany has produced world-class arts talents.

MUSIC 751

Germany punches above its weight, with a rich legacy of globally renowned composers and influential popular music.

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A proliferation of art museums shows how much Germans love art – be it medieval masterpieces or modern marvels.

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Princely palaces, soaring cathedrals and contemporary marvels have made this country an architectural wonderland.

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Glacier-licked Alps, coursing rivers, pretty vineyards and beach-fringed coastlines – Germany is a haven for outdoor pursuits.

Germany Today

Germany has always been hard to ignore. Today, Europe's most populous nation is also its biggest economic power and consequently has – albeit reluctantly – taken on a more active role in global politics, especially in the crises in Ukraine and Greece. A founding member of the European Union, it is solidly committed to preserving the alliance and making sure it is poised to deal with the political, social and military challenges of this increasingly uncertain and complex world.

Best on Film

The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; 2006) The East German secret police (Stasi) unmasked.

The Downfall (Oliver Hirschbiegel; 2004) The final days of Hitler, holed up in his Berlin bunker.

Das Boot (Wolfgang Petersen; 1981) WWII submarine drama.

Wings of Desire (Wim Wenders; 1987) An angel in love with a mortal.

Metropolis (Fritz Lang; 1927) Seminal sci-fi silent movie about a proletarian revolt.

Run Lola Run (Tom Tykwer; 1998) Energetic drama set in Berlin.

Best in Print

Grimms' Fairy Tales (Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm; 1812) The classic!

The Rise & Fall of the Third Reich (William L Shirer; 1960) One thousand pages of powerful reportage.

Berlin Alexanderplatz (Alfred Döblin; 1929) Berlin in the 1920s.

The Tin Drum (Günter Grass; 1959) WWII seen through the eyes of a boy who refuses to grow up.

The Reader (Bernhard Schlink; 1995) Boy meets girl in WWII; girl gets put on trial for war crimes.

Europe's Economic Engine

Germany weathered the recent global fiscal crisis better than most industrial nations, in large part because it now bears the fruits of decade-old key reforms, especially the liberalisation of its labour laws. It is the fourth-largest economy in the world (after the US, Japan and China) and the largest in the European Union. With its solid manufacturing base and an economic backbone of small and medium-sized businesses, it has drawn worldwide admiration, as well as criticism, for its relentless reliance on exports (one in four euros is earned from exports) and for using the euro to serve its own interests.

The European Commission reported 0.7% growth in the German economy for the fourth quarter of 2014, while the eurozone as a whole grew a mere 0.3%. GDP is expected to grow by 1.75% in 2015. Manufacturing orders and exports, especially to hungry markets in South America, Asia and Eastern Europe, are up, helped along by a weak euro. At the same time, the unemployment rate has dropped to around 6% (among the lowest in the EU), the property market is sizzling and consumer confidence is high.

Political Leadership

Aware of the burden of their country's 20th-century history, modern German leaders have traditionally avoided taking on a major political or military role in Europe. However, changing circumstances that pose a threat to European stability have led to a more assertive German foreign policy in recent years. Long accused of being reluctant to make tough decisions, Chancellor Angela Merkel has emerged as Europe's chief diplomat, demonstrating a commitment to a coherent European foreign policy and a willingness to take on a leadership role.