

GERMAN CULTURE COURSE

The German Festival Year

From Advent markets and carnival to Oktoberfest and remembrance: how Germany's customs are made, and how to test them.

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THE GERMAN FESTIVAL YEAR

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The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why a Festival Year? Scope & Sources

A visitor to Germany in December meets Christmas markets, in February masked carnival crowds, in May decorated trees in the village square and in September beer tents. Behind these scenes lies a calendar that is not the same everywhere in the country: some holidays are shared by all sixteen states, some belong to a single region, and some are much newer than they look. This first chapter explains why Germany's festival calendar is a patchwork, lays out the course, and lists the sources to use. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

A Calendar of Layers

Christian

Advent, Christmas, Easter, Ascension Day and Whitsun shape much of the year, together with saints' days and processions that are strongest in Catholic regions (check which).

Seasonal and folk

May Day trees, harvest festivals, lantern walks and carnival follow the farming and winter-spring cycle, and are often older than their church labels or are claimed to be (check each case).

Civic and invented

German Unity Day, remembrance days, wine and shooting festivals and Oktoberfest were created or reshaped by states, clubs and tourist boards, mostly in the last two centuries (check the dates).

Why Holidays Differ by State

- **A federal country.** Germany has sixteen states (Länder), and public holidays are mainly set at state level, apart from the national one on 3 October (check the legal detail).

- **Shared holidays.** New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, 1 May, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, 3 October and 25 and 26 December are public holidays in every state (check).
- **Regional holidays.** Epiphany (6 January), Corpus Christi, All Saints' Day (1 November) and Reformation Day (31 October) are public holidays only in some states, mainly following the old religious map (check which states, as lists change).
- **Why the map looks that way.** After the Reformation of the 1500s the German lands divided between Catholic and Protestant rulers, and the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 allowed each ruler to set the religion of the territory (check). The calendar of the south and west still shows this.
- **The East.** The German Democratic Republic discouraged church holidays, and the newer eastern states show different patterns of observance and a lower share of church members (check the figures).

Region (a broad sketch, check)	Typical emphasis
Catholic south and west, such as Bavaria and the Rhineland	Carnival or Fasnacht, saints' days, processions, Corpus Christi
Protestant north	Reformation Day, quieter Lent, strong Advent and Christmas customs, maritime festivals
The East	A mix of older folk customs and later civic days, with fewer church-based holidays

What can be said

"Germany celebrates X" is rarely true of the whole country. A careful statement names the region, the century and the evidence: for example "carnival is a major festival in Cologne and Mainz" rather than "Germans celebrate carnival". The rest of the course keeps to that habit.

Tradition and Invention

- **Old and new.** Some customs have long, documented histories. Others look ancient but were set in their current form in the 1800s or 1900s, when clubs, tourist offices and national movements tidied up local practice (check examples, which later chapters take case by case).

- **The idea.** The historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger described this process in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983): customs that claim great age are often recent (check the book's examples, which are mostly British).
- **Pagan claims.** Popular books often trace festivals to pre-Christian rites. The evidence is usually thin, and writers in the 1800s, Jacob Grimm among them, built theories that later scholars questioned (check).
- **The test.** For every custom in this course, ask: what is the earliest written record, and who wrote it?

Scope of the Course

Part (check)	Chapters	Topics
Winter	2, 3, 4	Advent and Christmas markets; Christmas, Silvester and *Dinner for One*; Three Kings and carnival
Spring and summer	5, 6	Easter, Walpurgis Night and May Day; shooting, wine and village festivals
Autumn and remembrance	7, 8	Oktoberfest, harvest and lanterns; Unity Day and remembrance days
Today	9, 10	Tourism, change and a capstone on invented against inherited tradition

The course is Germany-centred and follows the calendar from Advent round to Advent. It treats religious festivals respectfully and factually, without making claims of belief, and it treats customs as history and culture, not as travel advice or a guide to any one town's dates.

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
The Christmas tree is a German invention.	What is the earliest record, and where? (Chapter 2)
Everyone in Germany watches *Dinner for One* on New Year's Eve.	How many people, and when did the habit start? (Chapter 3)
Carnival is an ancient pagan survival.	What do the written records show? (Chapter 4)

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
Walpurgis Night is an old pagan festival.	When do the sources mention it, and what do they say? (Chapter 5)
Oktoberfest is centuries old.	What happened in 1810, and what has changed since? (Chapter 7)
German Unity Day is on the day the Wall fell.	Which date is it, and why was 9 November not chosen? (Chapter 8)

Sources to Use

- **Folklore and local history,** such as regional museums, town archives and the German Christmas Museum in Rothenburg ob der Tauber (check names and what is open).
- **Historians of custom,** especially those who separate documented origins from legend (check which works exist in English).
- **Tourist boards and organisers,** which publish dates and visitor numbers (check; these sources have their own interest in a good story).
- **Church and civic bodies,** for the meaning of holidays and the legal calendar, and for state holiday lists, which should be checked against the current year.
- **Contemporary documents,** such as newspapers, diaries and prints, which show how a custom was described at the time.

A British comparison

Britain also has a patchwork calendar. Scotland has its own bank holidays, including 2 January, and its own customs such as Hogmanay and Burns Night. For centuries the Church of Scotland discouraged Christmas, and Christmas Day became a public holiday in Scotland only in the later twentieth century (check the year). Edinburgh's Christmas market now borrows the German model (check). The German festival year is a useful mirror for asking which Scottish customs are old, which are revived and which are new.

Check the details

Names, dates and figures in this course come from general knowledge and are marked "check" where they are uncertain. Holiday lists change from year to year and differ by

state, and origin stories for customs are often retold without sources, so verify with current official calendars and with historians of custom before repeating them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose six festivals you know or have heard of, and sort each as Christian, seasonal or folk, or civic or invented, giving a reason and noting how sure you are.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare the public holidays of one German state with Scotland's, and say what the differences show about history.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one of the myths in the table and write a short plan for testing it: what evidence you would look for and where.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Layers:** Christian, seasonal or folk, civic or invented
- **Holidays:** set mainly by the sixteen states; a few shared by all (check)
- **The map:** Catholic south and west, Protestant north, a distinct East
- **The idea:** invented tradition: customs that look ancient are often recent

- **The test:** ask for the earliest written record and who wrote it

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Advent and the Christmas Markets

The German festival year begins, for most visitors, in late November, when wooden stalls go up in town squares and the smell of mulled wine and gingerbread fills the cold air. Advent is the four-week run-up to Christmas, and Germany has given the world several of its best-known customs: the Advent wreath, the paper Advent calendar, the Christmas market and, with some qualification, the Christmas tree. This chapter follows each one and asks, as the course does throughout, what the earliest written record is. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Advent at Home

The Advent wreath

A wreath with four candles, one lit on each Sunday of Advent. It is usually traced to the Protestant pastor Johann Hinrich Wichern, who in 1839 hung a wheel of candles in the Rauhes Haus, a home for poor children in Hamburg; the fir-branch version came later (check the dates and details).

The Advent calendar

A calendar with a door or pocket for each day from 1 to 24 December. Printed calendars are often credited to Gerhard Lang, a Munich printer, in the early 1900s, with chocolate versions common after the Second World War (check the dates). Earlier home-made counting customs existed.

The Nikolaus shoe

On the night of 5 to 6 December children clean a shoe and put it outside the door, and find it filled with sweets and small gifts from St Nicholas the next morning (check regional variants).

St Nicholas, the Christkind and the Weihnachtsmann

- **St Nicholas (6 December).** Based on a bishop of Myra in what is now Turkey, remembered as a giver of gifts. In many German homes he visits on 6 December, with a book of the year's good and bad deeds (check).
- **Companions.** He is sometimes accompanied by a dark figure, called Knecht Ruprecht in northern and central Germany, who carries a rod or a sack. In Bavaria and Austria the companion is the horned Krampus, with Krampus runs in early December (check the regions, and the origin stories, which are disputed and often claimed as pagan without proof).
- **The Christkind.** The gift-bringer on Christmas Eve in many Catholic regions and also in Protestant homes. A story says that Martin Luther promoted the Christ child to replace the saint after the Reformation, but the evidence is thin (check).
- **The Weihnachtsmann.** A bearded figure like Father Christmas or Santa Claus, more common in the north and east, and shaped by 19th-century German and American images (check).

The Christmas Markets

Market (check each)	Note
Dresden, Striezelmarkt	Claims to be the oldest in Germany, with a first record in 1434. The name comes from *Striezel*, a local word for a stollen loaf. A stollen festival is held on the Saturday before the second Advent Sunday.
Bautzen and Frankfurt	Bautzen's Wenceslas Market is dated to 1384 and Frankfurt's market is said to have been recorded in 1393. Both dates are claimed, and the records should be checked.
Nuremberg, Christkindlesmarkt	One of the best known, with a "Christkind" who opens the market from the Frauenkirche balcony. Records of the market date to the 1600s (check), and the Christkind figure is more recent.
Cologne, Munich, Berlin and many more	Hundreds of markets across the country. A figure such as "about 2,500" is often quoted, and should be treated as an estimate (check).

What can be said

Winter markets are recorded in German-speaking towns from the late Middle Ages, but they were originally ordinary trade fairs for winter supplies, not Christmas events. The "Christmas market" with a Christmas label and a focus on gifts, sweets and toys took

shape in the 1500s to 1800s and became a national image in the 1800s and 1900s (check). A claim of "the oldest Christmas market" depends on whether the earlier fair counts, which is why the dates above are contested.

What You Find at a Market

- **Drinks.** Glühwein (hot spiced wine), Kinderpunsch for children and Feuerzangenbowle, where a sugar loaf soaked in rum is set alight over the wine (check).
- **Food.** Lebkuchen (spiced gingerbread, with Nuremberg's the best known), Stollen (a fruit loaf, Dresden's a protected speciality, check), roasted almonds, and sausages such as Nuremberg's small Rostbratwürste.
- **Crafts.** Wooden figures, nutcrackers, smoking men, Christmas pyramids and candle arches from the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) in Saxony, a woodworking region with a long record (check).
- **Mugs.** Many markets sell Glühwein in a mug with a deposit, and each market has its own design (check).

The Christmas Tree

Claim or record (check each)	Note
Guild and town records, 1400s and 1500s	Several German towns, such as Freiburg and Bremen, have records of decorated trees at guild houses, but it is unclear whether these were Christmas trees or other festivals (check).
Strasbourg, 1605	A visitor's account describes fir trees set up in rooms at Christmas with paper roses, apples and sweets. It is one of the earliest descriptions usually cited (check; the city was then part of the Holy Roman Empire).
1800s	The tree spreads through Protestant Germany and then through Europe and America. In Britain it is popularised by royal use, with an 1848 picture of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's tree widely reproduced (check).
Candles	Real candles were used until electric lights replaced them in the 1900s, and some families still use wax candles (check).

"The Christmas tree is a German invention" is therefore an arguable claim. The evidence points to the Upper Rhine region in the 1500s and 1600s, but it is a custom that grew over time, not an

invention with a date and an inventor. Claims of pagan tree worship are claimed more often than shown.

A British comparison

Edinburgh's winter season includes a Christmas market with German-style stalls, and similar markets now run in many British cities (check). They are a modern import: the Christmas tree reached Britain only in the 1800s, and the market model largely after the 1990s. In Scotland, Hogmanay long rivalled Christmas in importance, so a visitor from Edinburgh may notice how central Advent is in Germany compared with the quieter run-up they know.

Check the details

Market dates, first records and visitor figures are advertised in ways that favour a good story, and the "oldest" claims are disputed. Check the opening dates and details with the town's official pages, and treat "first recorded" claims as claims until a source is named. Markets are public events, and security rules and layouts have changed in recent years (check).

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

List five Advent customs from this chapter, and for each give the earliest date or person usually named and say how well documented it is.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Write a short plan for testing the claim "The Christmas tree is a German invention": what counts as a Christmas tree, what evidence to look for and what a careful sentence would say.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare a German Christmas market with a British one you know or have read about: what was borrowed, what was changed and what is missing.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Advent wreath:** Wichern, Hamburg, 1839 (check)
- **Advent calendar:** printed versions credited to Gerhard Lang, Munich, early 1900s (check)
- **6 December:** St Nicholas; Knecht Ruprecht and Krampus as companions in some regions
- **Markets:** winter fairs since the late Middle Ages; Dresden 1434 claimed (check)
- **Tree:** Upper Rhine records from the 1500s and 1600s; a custom, not a dated invention

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Christmas, Silvester and *Dinner for One*

In Germany the main Christmas celebration is on the evening of 24 December, not the morning of the 25th, and the year closes on 31 December with fireworks, doughnuts, lead pouring and, for millions of viewers, a short British comedy sketch in black and white. This chapter covers the days from Christmas Eve to New Year, then looks closely at Dinner for One, which is a more interesting case of "tradition" than most: a foreign sketch that became a German ritual. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and one web check, and flagged "check".

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

Heiligabend

Holy Evening, 24 December, is the main event. Families often attend a church service, then exchange presents (*Bescherung*) in the evening, traditionally after the Christmas tree has been revealed to the children (check regional practice).

The two Christmas days

25 December is the first Christmas holiday and 26 December the second (*zweiter Weihnachtsfeiertag*), both public holidays in every state. They are usually spent with family and a large meal (check).

The food

Typical Christmas Eve dishes include potato salad with sausages, which is simple, and carp in some regions, with goose or roast meat on the 25th or 26th (check the regional habits, which differ a lot).

- **"Stille Nacht."** The carol *Silent Night* was first performed in 1818 at Oberndorf near Salzburg, in what is now Austria, with words by Joseph Mohr and music by Franz Xaver Gruber (check the details and the church where it was sung).
- **A late arrival.** The family-centred Christmas of the evening and the tree is largely a 19th-century development, as the previous chapter showed (check).

Silvester: New Year's Eve

Custom (check each)	Note
The name	31 December is St Sylvester's Day, after Pope Sylvester I, whose feast falls on that date. The German word *Silvester* means New Year's Eve.
Fireworks	Private fireworks are sold in the last days of the year and let off at midnight. Debates about injuries, air pollution and effects on pets have led to local restrictions and calls for a ban (check the current rules).
Bleigießen	Pouring melted lead into cold water and reading the shape as a prediction. Because lead is now restricted, wax or tin versions are common (check).
Doughnuts	Berliner or Pfannkuchen, the sugar-dusted doughnuts. A common joke is that one is filled with mustard instead of jam, so the unlucky eater is the "prankee" (check).
Luck charms	Lucky pigs, clover leaves and chimney sweeps are given as small gifts (check).
Food and drink	Sparkling wine, raclette, fondue or a cold buffet at home, with a toast of "Prosit Neujahr!" (check).
Public events	A large open-air party at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, and concerts on New Year's Day, such as the Vienna Philharmonic's, broadcast from Austria (check).

Dinner for One

What it is

A short comedy sketch of about eighteen minutes. An elderly English lady, Miss Sophie, holds a dinner party for her 90th birthday, with four guests who are all dead, so her butler James must play each one and drink their toasts. At each course he asks "The same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?" and she answers "The same procedure as every year, James!" As he drinks more, he trips over the tiger-skin rug, and the sketch ends with a joke about "the same procedure". (check the wording and the plot details, which are given from memory.)

Question (check each)	What the sources say
Who wrote it?	The English writer Lauri Wylie wrote the sketch in the 1930s (check). It was a staple of British music-hall and summer shows.
Who made the German recording?	The comedian Freddie Frinton played the butler and May Warden played Miss Sophie. Reports say a German producer or director saw them perform in Blackpool, and NDR recorded it before an audience in Hamburg in 1963 (check the details). The German title is *Der 90. Geburtstag*.
When did it become a ritual?	The New Year's Eve broadcast is dated by several sources to 1972, after earlier showings (check). Since then it has been shown again, in many regional channels, each year.
Why is it in English?	The recording is in English with a short German introduction. Part of its appeal is that the lines are quoted in English by German speakers, who say "the same procedure as every year" as a catchphrase.
Is it known in Britain?	Far less than in Germany. Reports say it was little known in Britain and was shown on British television for the first time only in recent years (check when). It is also a New Year's Eve ritual in Scandinavia and other countries (check which).
The record	Guinness World Records is reported to list it as the most repeated television programme (check the current wording).

> **A British comparison: Hogmanay**
>
> Scotland has its own New Year ritual: Hogmanay, with first-footing (the first visitor of the year, ideally a tall dark man carrying coal, whisky or shortbread, check) and a big street party in Edinburgh that has run since the early 1990s (check). German Silvester is noisier at home and quieter in the streets, while Hogmanay is the opposite. A Scottish viewer of *Dinner for One* may be surprised that a British music-hall sketch about drink, loneliness and class has become another country's New Year habit.

What *Dinner for One* Shows About Tradition

- **A recent tradition.** It is a ritual of the television age, established in the 1970s, not an ancient custom (check).

- **Borrowed, not invented.** It was adopted from abroad and made local through repetition, which is how many "traditions" form.
- **The role of a broadcaster.** A scheduling decision by a broadcaster, repeated each year, created a national habit. This is a modern form of what the previous chapters showed for clubs and tourist boards.
- **Claims to test.** "Everyone in Germany watches it" is a claim: audience figures from the broadcasters give actual numbers (check), and the share of people who watch each year is much less than "everyone".

Check the details

Details of the sketch's history differ between reports, for example the date it was first performed on stage (one source gave 1945, which later research corrected) and the exact year of the first New Year's Eve broadcast. Treat them as claims until you find the broadcaster's own record. Firework rules and regional customs also change.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Compare German Christmas Eve with a Scottish Christmas Day: what happens, what is eaten and what is different in the order of the festival.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Use the six-question method (who, evidence, when, definition, who gains, what would change my mind) on the claim "Everyone in Germany watches *Dinner for One* on New Year's Eve".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose a custom that was borrowed from another country (*Dinner for One*, the Christmas market in Edinburgh or another) and explain how it became "local".

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Heiligabend:** 24 December evening; presents then; 25 and 26 are holidays
- **Silvester:** 31 December, after Pope Sylvester I; fireworks, doughnuts, lead or wax pouring
- **Dinner for One:** British sketch by Lauri Wylie; German recording 1963 (NDR); ritual from the 1970s (check)
- **Catchphrase:** "The same procedure as every year"
- **Lesson:** a borrowed, broadcaster-made tradition

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Three Kings, Carnival and Fasnacht

After the Christmas season the German calendar turns to one of its most regional festivals. In Cologne and Mainz, crowds in costume line the streets for a procession, in the south-west wooden-masked figures leap through the old towns, and in much of the north and east most people barely notice the season at all. This chapter starts with Epiphany on 6 January, then follows the "fifth season" of carnival through its regional names and forms, and ends by testing the common claim that carnival is an ancient pagan survival. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Three Kings: 6 January

The feast

Epiphany, 6 January, marks the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus in the Christian tradition. It is a public holiday only in some states, including Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria and Saxony-Anhalt (check the current list).

The Sternsinger

Children dressed as the three kings, with a star on a pole, go from door to door, sing, and chalk a blessing above the door in the form "20*C+M+B+" followed by the year (check the formula and its meaning, which is explained in different ways). They collect donations for children's charities, in a campaign organised by the Catholic Church since 1959 (check).

Cologne's shrine

Cologne Cathedral holds a large gold shrine said to contain the relics of the Three Kings, which were reported to have been brought to Cologne from Milan in 1164 (check). The shrine explains why the kings feature in the city's arms and why the cathedral is a pilgrimage site.

What Carnival Is

- **The idea.** A period of licensed revelry, masks and mockery of authority before the fast of Lent. Ash Wednesday ends it, and the following forty days are the Lenten season (check the length).
- **The word.** *Karneval*, *Fastnacht*, *Fasching* and *Fasnet* are the four main German names. The origin of "carnival" itself is debated, and a popular explanation (Latin *carne vale*, "farewell to meat") is only one of the theories (check).
- **The days.** The peak is the week before Ash Wednesday: Weiberfastnacht or "Women's Carnival" on the Thursday, when women symbolically take over, then the weekend, Rosenmontag (Rose Monday, with the largest processions) and Shrove Tuesday (check the names and what happens in each place).
- **The date moves.** Because Easter moves, so does carnival: it can fall in January or February (check the rule).

Region and name (check each)	Character
Rhineland, Cologne and Düsseldorf: *Karneval*	Organised by carnival societies, with sessions in halls, a "Dreigestirn" of Prince, Peasant and Virgin in Cologne (played by men), and large Rosenmontag processions where sweets (*Kamelle*) are thrown to the crowd. The cry is "Alaaf" in Cologne and "Helau" in Düsseldorf and Mainz.
Mainz and Hesse: *Fastnacht*	Famous for political satire in speeches and for a televised evening show of sketches and songs. The cry is "Helau".
Bavaria and parts of the east: *Fasching*	Balls, costumes and doughnut-like pastries, with Munich's Viktualienmarkt traders' dance as a well-known event. Less street procession than the Rhineland.
Swabian-Alemannic south-west: *Fasnet* or *Fasnacht*	Associated with "Narrenzünfte" (fools' guilds) and carved wooden masks and costumes, with a "Narrensprung" parade of figures. Rottweil and Elzach are among the best-known places (check).

The Fifth Season: Cologne's Calendar

- **11 November at 11:11.** The carnival season is opened each year at this moment (check the date and time and why 11 was chosen, which is explained as a fool's number or a play on equality, both unproven).

- **Pause and resumption.** The season mostly rests during Advent and Christmas, and resumes in January with sessions and balls.
- **The 1823 reform.** Cologne's carnival is usually dated in its modern organised form to 1823, when a committee was set up and a first Rosenmontag procession was held, a response to earlier bans and to the era after French rule (check the details).
- **Clubs and structure.** The societies, uniforms and ranks, some of which mock military uniforms, were created in the 1800s (check).
- **The end.** In Cologne a straw figure called the *Nubbel* is burned on the night before Ash Wednesday, taking the blame for the sins of the season (check).

Not Everywhere, and Not Always

- **Protestant north.** Carnival is much weaker in the Protestant north, in Hamburg and Bremen for instance, where the pre-Lent tradition was not part of the local church year (check).
- **The East.** Fasching had places in the GDR, with some towns continuing and the activity growing again after 1990 (check).
- **Cancellations.** Processions have been called off at times, as in 1991 during the Gulf War and in 2021 during the pandemic (check the years and reasons).
- **The Nazi period.** Carnival societies were brought into line under the Nazi regime, and some floats and speeches carried antisemitic themes. Cologne and Mainz have since studied and acknowledged this (check the details).
- **Debates today.** Costumes that mock ethnic groups, as well as satire about politicians, are argued over each year (check current examples).

Is Carnival an Ancient Pagan Survival?

Position (check each)	The argument
Pagan survival	Popular accounts and some 19th-century writers linked masks and noise to rites to drive out winter. The evidence is mostly a resemblance, and an unbroken line of custom is not shown.

Position (check each)	The argument
Medieval Christian calendar	Many historians point to the pre-Lent feasting and licence that grew in the Middle Ages, in a church year that required fasting, and note records of fools' feasts and pre-Lent revels from the late Middle Ages.
19th-century revival	The modern forms, such as uniforms and societies, processions and the fifth season, are largely 1800s creations, and the Rhenish form was shaped by middle-class societies.

What can be said

The best-supported statement is that pre-Lent revelry is recorded in the Middle Ages and tied to the church calendar, that its modern organised form is largely from the 1800s, and that a direct pagan origin is claimed but not shown. Masks and processions may echo earlier practices, but similar customs elsewhere are not proof of descent.

A British comparison

Britain has carnival-like days with different roots: Shrove Tuesday pancakes, Up Helly Aa in Shetland (largely a 19th-century fire festival with older roots claimed, check), the Notting Hill Carnival from the 1960s Caribbean community, and Bonfire Night. Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival on Calton Hill, started in 1988, is a revived or invented festival that claims a Celtic basis (check), a close match for the German question of tradition and invention.

Check the details

Dates of events, customs of each town, the shape of the Dreigestirn and the wording of the cries differ by place, and carnival organisers publish their own histories. Verify with the society or town and with a historian of custom, and treat origin stories as claims.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a table of the four regional forms of carnival in the chapter, with one distinctive feature of each and the place it is most associated with.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Use the six-question method on the claim "German carnival is an ancient pagan survival" and write a careful replacement sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare German carnival with Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival or Hogmanay: what is claimed about their age, what is documented and what does each show about invented tradition.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **6 January:** Epiphany; Sternsinger collect for charity
- **Names:** Karneval (Rhineland), Fastnacht (Mainz), Fasching (Bavaria), Fasnet (south-west)
- **Key days:** Weiberfastnacht, Rosenmontag, Ash Wednesday
- **Cologne:** season opens 11 November at 11:11; modern form from 1823 (check)
- **Origin:** medieval pre-Lent revelry is recorded; pagan descent is claimed, not shown

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Easter, Walpurgis Night and May Day

Spring in Germany brings a run of festivals packed into a few weeks: Easter with its eggs, bonfires and quiet Good Friday, then Walpurgis Night on 30 April when witches are said to gather on a mountain, then 1 May with its decorated trees and trade-union marches, and Ascension Day, when groups of men pull handcarts of beer through the countryside. This chapter covers each of them and looks at how much of the "ancient" is older than the nineteenth century. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Easter

The Easter bunny

The *Osterhase* brings eggs to children. A German doctor, Georg Franck von Franckenau, mentioned the custom in a 1682 treatise, which is often cited as the earliest written source (check). The custom spread through Germany in the 1800s and abroad with German emigrants.

Eggs and trees

Eggs are dyed, painted and hung on branches, sometimes on a bush or tree in the garden. In the Franconian region some villages decorate wells with eggs and garlands as an *Osterbrunnen* (check).

Easter fires

In northern Germany especially, large bonfires, *Osterfeuer*, are lit on Holy Saturday or Easter Sunday evening (check the dates), and are explained as a church custom or as a spring fire. Some places also roll burning wheels down a hill (check).

- **Holy Week.** Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday (*Karfreitag*, a day of mourning) and Holy Saturday lead to Easter Sunday and Easter Monday, which is a public holiday in every state (check).

- **The Easter walk.** The *Osterspaziergang* is a family walk in spring, and the title of a famous scene in Goethe's *Faust*, published in 1808 (check).
- **Good Friday rules.** Good Friday is one of the "quiet days" (*stille Tage*), and state laws limit public dancing and some events, with details differing by state (check). Some films have been restricted on certain days, a long-running subject of argument, and several courts have been asked to rule on it (check the cases).

Walpurgis Night: 30 April

Point (check each)	Note
The saint	Walpurga (Walburga), an English-born abbess and missionary in Germany in the 700s, with a feast day on 25 February and a second one on 1 May, linked to the moving of her relics in the 800s (check). The night before 1 May bears her name.
The witches	Folklore says that witches gather on the night of 30 April on the Brocken, the highest peak of the Harz mountains, in central Germany. The idea is recorded in the early modern period in stories of the Brocken as a place of witches (check).
Goethe	The Walpurgis Night scene in *Faust* (1808) made the Brocken gathering famous across Europe.
Today	Harz towns such as Thale and Schierke hold costumed festivals, bonfires, and a "Hexentanzplatz" (witches' dance place) attraction, and the event is promoted as tourism (check the history of the modern festival, which looks largely 19th and 20th century).
Elsewhere	Walpurgis Night is also celebrated in Sweden and Finland with bonfires and student festivities, which shows a wider spring-fire tradition (check).

What can be said

The link between Walpurga's name, the witch stories and spring bonfires is real in popular culture, but how the three came together is less clear. Some writers connect it to a pre-Christian spring festival, yet the surviving evidence mostly begins in the early modern period, and the festival that tourists see in the Harz was largely built up from the 1900s

(check). A careful statement says what is documented: the saint's day, the witch folklore, the literary fame and the modern events.

The Maibaum and 1 May

- **The Maibaum.** A tall tree or pole is set up in the village or town on or before 1 May, stripped of bark and hung with ribbons and signs, in Bavaria often painted blue and white with symbols of local trades (check). Villages guard it, and neighbours sometimes try to steal it as a game, with a ransom of beer (check).
- **The Rhineland variant.** Young men may put a birch tree outside the house of a girl they like on the night before May Day, a custom called *Liebesmaien* or something similar (check).
- **Dancing into May.** *Tanz in den Mai* parties on 30 April, together with bonfires and music, are common (check).
- **How old.** May trees are recorded in the Middle Ages, but the Bavarian painted pole with guild signs and the present festival form are largely later (check).

1 May as a Labour Day

Date (check each)	Event
1886	US labour demonstrations for an eight-hour day, with the Haymarket events in Chicago in early May, are the root of the international 1 May.
1889	The Second International, a meeting of socialist parties, calls for an annual demonstration on 1 May.
1933	The Nazi government made 1 May a national holiday ("Day of National Labour") and then banned independent trade unions the next day (check the details).
After 1945	The holiday continued in both German states, with trade-union rallies in the West (the DGB) and state-organised parades in the East.
Berlin, 1987 onward	1 May riots in Kreuzberg became a recurring event, and the "Myfest" street festival was created in 2003 to calm the day (check the history).

Ascension Day and Whitsun

- **Ascension Day.** A public holiday forty days after Easter, always on a Thursday (check). It is also called Vatertag or Herrentag ("Father's Day" or "Men's Day"), when groups of men go on outings with a handcart (*Bollerwagen*) of beer, a custom regularly described in the press and sometimes criticised for drunkenness (check).
- **Whitsun.** Pentecost Sunday and Monday are public holidays, often used for travel and outdoor events. A large gathering of the Gothic music scene takes place in Leipzig at Whitsun, the Wave-Gotik-Treffen, held since 1992 (check).
- **Corpus Christi.** A Thursday in late spring or early summer, a public holiday only in some states, with processions in Catholic regions (check).

A British comparison

Britain has no fixed 1 May holiday. The "Early May bank holiday" falls on the first Monday of May and dates from 1978 (check), so it follows the weekend rather than the labour-movement date. Maypoles survive in English villages, and Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival on 30 April (see the previous chapter) is a modern spring-fire festival. Easter eggs and the Easter bunny are familiar to British children, and the bunny is itself an import from Germany via 19th-century migration (check).

Check the details

The history of many spring customs is retold with confidence but little evidence. Rules about Good Friday and holidays differ by state and change, so check the state's current law. Treat claims about pagan origins as claims until a source from the time is named.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a timeline from Holy Week to Whitsun with the customs of each day, and mark which are public holidays in every state.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Sort the claims about Walpurgis Night (saint, witches, Goethe, pagan fire, Harz tourism) by how well documented each is.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why 1 May is a labour day in Germany but a movable bank holiday in Britain, and what each choice shows.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Osterhase:** first written mention 1682 (check); spread in the 1800s
- **Good Friday:** a quiet day with state-level limits on events (check)
- **30 April:** Walpurgis Night; witches on the Brocken; Goethe's *Faust*
- **1 May:** Maibaum, labour day, Nazi-era holiday of 1933, Berlin's Myfest
- **Ascension Day:** Vatertag with the Bollerwagen

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Summer: Schützenfest, Wine and Village Fairs

Summer in Germany is the season of the local fair. Almost every town and village has its own weekend with a marquee, a brass band, a parade and rides, and many have a festival of something specific: shooting, wine, sailing, music. Most of these are neither religious nor national, but belong to clubs and communities, and many look older than they are. This chapter covers the main types, from the shooting festival to the giant rock festival and the Pride parade, and asks which of them are medieval, which are nineteenth-century and which are only decades old. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Schützenfest

Origins

Shooting guilds (*Schützengilden*) grew up in medieval towns as citizen militias that defended the walls with crossbows and later guns (check). Over time they became social clubs, and the military role faded.

The festival

A Schützenfest lasts a weekend or longer, with a parade in uniform, a marquee with beer and music, a fair, and a shooting contest at a wooden bird (*Vogelschießen*). The winner becomes the *Schützenkönig* (shooting king) for a year (check the details).

The biggest

The Hanover Schützenfest in early summer is advertised as the largest in the world (check), and Neuss in the Rhineland has a large festival with a long tradition (check). Such "largest" claims are advertising and should be treated as claims.

- **Two kinds of club.** Catholic brotherhoods (*Schützenbruderschaften*) with church ties, and sport-shooting clubs, are different organisations with different traditions (check).
- **Changes.** Women were long excluded from the top role and many clubs now allow queens or female kings (check). Debates about guns, uniforms and the clubs' political links come

up from time to time.

Kirmes and Volksfest

Term (check each)	Meaning
Kirmes or *Kerwa*	From *Kirchmesse*, the mass on the anniversary of a church's dedication, which in the Middle Ages was marked by a village fair. In many regions the Kirmes is still a village's main summer weekend.
Volksfest	"People's festival": a large public fair with beer tents, rides and music. The Cannstatter Volksfest in Stuttgart is a well-known example, dated to 1818 under King Wilhelm I of Württemberg (check).
Rummel, *Dult*	Regional words for a funfair; the Auer Dult in Munich is a market fair with a long history (check).
The trade	Travelling showmen (*Schausteller*) move between fairs with rides and food stalls, and the trade is a family business in many cases (check).

Wine Festivals

- **Where.** Mostly in the wine regions of the Rhine, Moselle, Palatinate and Franconia, where almost every wine village holds a *Weinfest* in late summer or autumn (check).
- **Bad Dürkheim.** The *Wurstmarkt* in the Palatinate calls itself the world's largest wine festival, with a giant wine barrel built as a restaurant, and a history it traces back to the 1400s or to 1832 (check; the dates are disputed).
- **Wine queens.** Villages and regions choose a wine queen, and a German Wine Queen has been chosen since 1949 (check).
- **Rhine in Flames.** Fireworks and illuminated ships on the Rhine at several places during the summer (check the dates and towns).
- **New wine.** *Federweißer*, partly fermented grape juice, and onion tart arrive in early autumn (see the next chapter, check).

Harbours and Sailing

Event (check each)	Note
Kieler Woche, Kiel	A sailing regatta and street festival in June, dated to the 1880s and one of the largest sailing events in the world. It is held in the city's harbour on the Baltic.
Hafengeburtstag, Hamburg	The "port's birthday" in May, which celebrates a charter said to have been granted in 1189. Historians have shown that the charter is a later forgery, though the festival continues (check the details).
Hanse Sail, Rostock	A gathering of historic sailing ships in August, started after 1990 (check).

A birthday on a forgery

Hamburg's port birthday is a clear example of tradition and invention: the celebration is tied to a charter of 1189 that scholars say was forged in the 1200s, and the festival itself began in the 1900s (check both). It shows that a festival can be real and popular even when its founding story is not.

Music Festivals and Pride

- **Bayreuth Festival.** Founded by the composer Richard Wagner, opened in 1876 in a theatre he designed (check). It is a place of pilgrimage for opera fans and a subject of debate over Wagner and the Nazi era (see *German Music*).
- **Wacken Open Air.** A heavy-metal festival held in the village of Wacken in Schleswig-Holstein since 1990, with tens of thousands of visitors (check the figures).
- **Rock am Ring and Rock im Park.** Large rock festivals held in parallel at two sites since the 1980s and 1990s (check the dates and the move of the Ring site).
- **Love Parade.** A techno street parade begun in Berlin in 1989 and later held in other cities. The 2010 event in Duisburg ended in a crowd crush that killed 21 people, and the parade was not held again (check the number and the later legal proceedings).
- **Christopher Street Day.** Pride marches, called CSD in Germany, are held in many cities, with Berlin's dating from 1979 (check). They are political demonstrations and parties, and in some towns they are the target of protests (check).

A British comparison

Scotland has strong summer traditions of its own: the Highland games, which in their present form owe much to a 19th-century romantic revival after George IV's 1822 visit to Edinburgh (check); the Common Ridings of the Borders towns, which are older and community-based (check); and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, founded in 1947 beside the International Festival (check). Like the German Kirmes and Schützenfest, these combine real older roots with later shaping, and Wacken matches the role of Glastonbury and other large music festivals.

Check the details

"Oldest" and "largest" claims are often advertising and are hard to test. Dates, visitor numbers, rules and safety arrangements for events change from year to year, and the Love Parade disaster was the subject of long legal proceedings, so check current and reliable sources for any figure you intend to repeat.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose three summer festivals from the chapter and say for each who organises it, what it celebrates and how old it really is.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain how a festival can be popular and real even if its founding story is false, using the Hamburg port's birthday as the example.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare a German summer fair or Schützenfest with a Scottish Highland games or Common Riding: what is similar, what is different, and what is claimed about age.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Schützenfest:** shooting-club festival; king chosen by shooting at a wooden bird
- **Kirmes:** from *Kirchmesse*; village fair; Volksfest is a large public fair
- **Wine festivals:** Bad Dürkheim Wurstmarkt, wine queens, Rhine in Flames
- **Harbours:** Kieler Woche; Hamburg's birthday rests on a forged charter (check)
- **Music and Pride:** Bayreuth 1876, Wacken, Love Parade (ended 2010), CSD

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Autumn: Oktoberfest, Harvest and Lanterns

Autumn begins with the world's most famous beer festival and ends with children walking through dark streets carrying paper lanterns and singing. In between come harvest thanks in church, new wine and onion tart, and, in recent decades, pumpkins and costumes imported from abroad. This chapter treats Oktoberfest briefly, because it has its own course, and then follows the quieter autumn customs: Erntedank, the new wine, St Martin on 11 November and the 31 October that is both Reformation Day and Halloween. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Oktoberfest in Brief

The origin

The first Oktoberfest is dated to October 1810, when Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria (later King Ludwig I) married Princess Therese of Saxe-Hildburghausen. The citizens of Munich were invited to celebrate on a meadow outside the city, later named the Theresienwiese, with horse races (check the details).

Now

Held on the same meadow in Munich for about two weeks from mid-September to the first Sunday in October (check the rule), with huge beer tents, a fair and several million visitors in a typical year (check the figure). The mayor taps the first barrel with the words "O'zapft is!" (It's tapped!).

The question

The festival is real and about two hundred years old, but the rule that it ends in October, the beer tents, the costumes and the song list are later developments (check). The full story, with the beer rules, is in *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot*.

Many other places hold their own "Oktoberfest" or imitate Munich's, from other German cities to places in Britain and America, which is a pattern seen throughout this course: a local custom

becomes a model and a brand (check).

Erntedank: Harvest Thanks

- **The day.** Usually the first Sunday of October in Protestant and Catholic churches, though the date varies by region and church (check). It is not a public holiday.
- **Customs.** The church is decorated with fruit, vegetables, grain and bread. A harvest crown (*Erntekrone*) may be carried in a procession, and food is donated to people in need (check).
- **Origin.** Thanksgiving for the harvest is far older than the modern festival, but the fixed church date is a modern arrangement, and a national Erntedank was set up in the 1800s and 1900s (check).
- **Not like the American holiday.** The German festival is mostly religious and local, with no turkey dinner or national story (check). It is a different custom with a similar purpose.

New Wine, Pumpkins and Potato Fires

Item (check each)	Note
Federweißer and *Zwiebelkuchen*	Young, partly fermented wine and onion tart, a seasonal pairing in the wine regions in September and October. The wine is only sold for a short time, because it keeps fermenting.
Pumpkins	Pumpkin fairs, such as the large display at Ludwigsburg Palace (check), are a recent but popular autumn attraction.
Potato fires and kites	In parts of the north, farm families burned stubble and roasted potatoes on autumn fires, and children flew kites. Both are mostly local memories now (check).
Wine harvest	The grape harvest (*Weinlese*) is a working season for the wine regions and often the centre of village festivals.

St Martin: 11 November

- **The saint.** Martin of Tours, a 4th-century Roman soldier who, in the story, cut his cloak in two and gave half to a freezing beggar, later becoming a bishop (check). He is a popular saint in Germany.

- **Lantern walks.** Children in many towns and villages make paper lanterns at school and walk in the dark after a church service, with a rider dressed as the saint on a horse, singing songs such as "Ich geh mit meiner Laterne" (check). The walk is usually ended with a bonfire and a sweet bread *Weckmann* or *Stutenkerl* (check).
- **The goose.** A roast goose is eaten at Martinmas. A legend says that Martin tried to avoid being made bishop by hiding in a goose pen, and that the geese gave him away (check). Other explanations point to the end of the farming year, when tenants paid dues and geese were fattened and slaughtered (check).
- **Singing for sweets.** In parts of the Rhineland children go from door to door singing and collecting sweets on the evening of 10 or 11 November, *Martinssingen*, which may remind a Scot of guising (check).
- **The Luther link.** Martin Luther was born on 10 November 1483 and was baptised the next day, St Martin's Day, which is the reason for his first name (check).
- **The same date as carnival.** Carnival's "fifth season" opens at 11:11 on 11 November in Cologne (see Chapter 4, check), and the two events happen in the same city on the same evening.

31 October: Reformation Day and Halloween

Event (check each)	Note
Reformation Day	On 31 October 1517 Martin Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Historians debate whether he nailed them to the door or sent them to the archbishop, though the date is traditional. It is a public holiday in the eastern states and a few others (check which).
All Saints and All Souls	1 and 2 November. All Saints' Day is a public holiday in some mainly Catholic states, when families visit and decorate graves with candles and flowers (check).
Halloween	Costume parties, pumpkins and "Süßes oder Saures" (sweets or sour) spread in Germany mainly from the 1990s, driven by shops, television and American influence (check the date). Some churches objected, and some Protestant churches have used the evening for events on the Reformation (check).

Imported, not ancient

German Halloween is a good example of a custom that arrived within living memory. It is not a Germanic survival, despite a claim that it links to an old autumn festival. The evidence points to commerce and media in the late twentieth century, and the question for a historian is why a foreign custom took root, as with *Dinner for One* in Chapter 3.

A British comparison

Halloween is much older in Scotland, where children went "guising" in costume for treats, and carved turnip lanterns (*tumshies*) before pumpkins became usual (check). Robert Burns wrote a poem called "Halloween" in 1785. Some writers argue that the Scottish and Irish customs travelled to America and returned in modified form, which is why German Halloween arrived with an American look (check). Bonfire Night, on 5 November, falls between Halloween and St Martin's Day.

Check the details

Dates of Erntedank, state holidays and festival start dates vary, and stories about Martin, Luther and the goose are traditional and partly legendary. Verify with the church, town or festival, and treat the origin stories as claims.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a timeline from late September to mid-November with the festivals of this chapter, and note which are religious, which are civic and which are imported.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the legend of St Martin and the goose, and say what the other explanations of the goose dinner are and which is best supported.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Halloween in Germany and in Scotland: when each took root, how it is celebrated, and what that shows about imported and inherited customs.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Oktoberfest:** 1810 royal wedding; full story in *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot*
- **Erntedank:** harvest thanks, usually early October, church-based
- **New wine:** Federweißer with Zwiebelkuchen
- **St Martin (11 Nov):** lantern walks, the goose, Weckmann
- **31 Oct:** Reformation Day (some states); Halloween arrived from the 1990s

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Remembrance and the Civic Calendar

Not every date on the German calendar is a celebration. Alongside the markets and fairs sit days of mourning, remembrance and political reflection, and the country's civic holiday is placed on a date chosen partly to avoid another one. This chapter covers German Unity Day, the problem of 9 November, the days for victims of the Nazi regime and for the dead of the wars, and the church's last Sundays of the year. It is written factually and respectfully, and the aim is to understand how a country marks days that are not joyful. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

German Unity Day: 3 October

The day

On 3 October 1990 the German Democratic Republic joined the Federal Republic, and the date has been the national holiday, the *Tag der Deutschen Einheit*, since then (check). It is the only public holiday set at national level.

The celebrations

An official ceremony and a public festival take place each year in a different state capital, rotating with the state that holds the presidency of the upper house, the Bundesrat (check). Most citizens treat it as a day off.

Earlier dates

West Germany marked 17 June as a "Day of German Unity" from 1954 to 1990, in memory of the 1953 uprising in East Germany, and the GDR celebrated 7 October as the Republic's founding day (check).

Why Not 9 November?

Year (check each)	Event on 9 November
1848	The liberal politician Robert Blum was executed in Vienna after the failed revolution.
1918	The Kaiser's abdication was announced and a republic was proclaimed in Berlin.
1923	Hitler's failed putsch in Munich.
1938	The night of the November pogroms, *Kristallnacht* or *Reichspogromnacht*, in which synagogues were burned, Jewish shops and homes attacked, and thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps.
1989	The Berlin Wall was opened, which led to unification the following year.

A fateful date

Because 9 November holds both a day of national joy (1989) and a day of national shame (1938), it is called the *Schicksalstag*, the fateful day (check the term). When the date for the national holiday was chosen in 1990, 3 October, the day the treaty took effect, was preferred over 9 November for that reason (check). The decision shows how a calendar can be shaped by what a country does not want to celebrate.

- **How 9 November is marked.** With memorial ceremonies, readings of names, and in many towns the cleaning of the *Stolpersteine*, the small brass plaques set in pavements for victims of the Nazi regime (check).
- **The 1989 anniversary.** Large events in Berlin mark the Wall's opening, especially at round-number anniversaries (check).

Remembering the Victims of National Socialism

- **27 January.** The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism, set by the Federal President Roman Herzog in 1996, on the date Auschwitz was liberated in 1945 (check). The Bundestag holds a ceremony, and schools, memorial sites and local groups hold events. The United Nations adopted the same date as an international day in 2005 (check).
- **8 May.** The end of the war in Europe in 1945. For many decades it was described as a defeat or a collapse, until President Richard von Weizsäcker's speech of 8 May 1985 called

it a day of liberation from the Nazi regime (check the wording and the context). Berlin has marked the day as a public holiday in some years (check).

- **20 July.** The anniversary of the failed 1944 plot to kill Hitler, remembered in a ceremony at the Bendlerblock in Berlin and by oath-taking of new soldiers (check).
- **The memory culture.** The German word *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance) describes this set of days, memorials, museums and school visits. It developed over decades and was argued over in each (check).

Volkstrauertag and the Church's Last Sundays

Day (check each)	Note
Volkstrauertag	The "people's day of mourning", on the second Sunday before Advent. It was begun after the First World War by the Volksbund, the war graves organisation, to remember soldiers. The Nazis changed its name and purpose to a heroes' memorial day. Since the 1950s it has remembered the dead of both world wars and victims of violence, with a Bundestag ceremony.
Buß- und Bettag	The Day of Repentance and Prayer, on the Wednesday before the last Sunday of the church year. It was a public holiday in most states until 1995, when it was dropped to pay for care insurance, and it remains one in Saxony.
Totensonntag	"Sunday of the dead", also called Eternity Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent. In Protestant churches the names of those who died in the year are read, and in many states it is one of the quiet days with limits on public events. Its origins are often traced to Prussia in 1816 (check).

A British comparison

Britain's Remembrance Sunday and 11 November, with the red poppy, centre on the First World War and later conflicts, and the Poppy Appeal began after 1921 (check). They are part of an unbroken national narrative of sacrifice, while the German days must remember defeat, guilt and victims alongside soldiers. Scotland also has days such as St Andrew's Day on 30 November, a bank holiday since 2007 (check), and Burns Night on 25 January, which are celebrations of identity. Germany's nearest match to a national day, 3 October, is much more restrained.

Check the details

Dates, names and the legal status of remembrance days are specific, and some change from year to year. Several are the subject of political argument about how to remember and who is included. Verify with official sources, such as the Bundestag, the Federal Agency for Civic Education and memorial sites, and treat claims about meaning with care.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a paragraph why Germany's national holiday is on 3 October and not 9 November, using at least three events from the table.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Trace how the meaning of 8 May changed from 1945 to 1985, and say what that shows about how national days are shaped.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Germany's Volkstrauertag and 27 January with Britain's Remembrance Sunday: who is remembered, how the day is marked, and what each shows about the national story.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **3 October:** Unity Day, the national holiday since 1990 (check)

- **9 November:** 1848, 1918, 1923, 1938, 1989: the fateful day
- **27 January:** remembrance of the victims of National Socialism, since 1996 (check)
- **8 May:** the end of the war; the "liberation" speech of 1985 (check)
- **November Sundays:** Volkstrauertag and Totensonntag; Buß- und Bettag only in Saxony as a holiday

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Festivals Today: Tradition, Tourism and Change

The festivals of the earlier chapters are not museum pieces. They are run by councils, clubs and companies, visited by millions, argued over by politicians, and changed by new residents, new rules and new technology. This chapter looks at the pressures on the German festival year today: tourism and money, the festivals of communities that came to Germany in the last sixty years, safety rules and the pandemic, energy and waste, and the question of who decides what counts as a tradition. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check", and this is a fast-moving subject.

Tourism and Money

Visitors

Large events draw millions: Oktoberfest several million a year, and the biggest Christmas markets each over a million (check the figures, which are often organisers' estimates). Hotels, transport and traders depend on them.

The trade

Showmen, stall holders, brewers and local councils earn money from fairs and markets, and cities compete to be known for a festival (check the figures). Many markets are run by event companies on behalf of the city.

The risk

Critics say that a successful festival can become a stage set for visitors, with higher prices, uniform stalls and fewer local people. Defenders reply that tourist money pays for the festival to continue (check examples).

New Communities, New Festivals

- **Who lives in Germany.** From the 1950s onward the "guest workers" from Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey and elsewhere came to work, many of them settled, and later arrivals came

from many countries (check). Millions of people in Germany have a family history of migration, including a large community with Turkish roots (check the figures).

- **Muslim festivals.** Eid al-Fitr, ending Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha are celebrated by Muslim communities, with prayers, family visits and meals. They are not public holidays in most states, and the question of whether they should be, or whether pupils should have leave, has been debated (check the position in each state).
- **Jewish life.** Festivals such as Hanukkah are celebrated publicly in some cities, with large candle-lighting events, in a country where Jewish communities were destroyed in the Nazi years and have been rebuilt since (check). Security for such events is a serious issue.
- **Shared events.** The Karneval der Kulturen in Berlin, held at Whitsun since 1996, is a street parade of the city's communities (check). Local Turkish, Italian and Greek festivals are part of many towns' summer calendar.
- **Questions.** Debates about which festivals count as "German" can be about identity as well as the calendar, and the history of this chapter shows that German festivals have always been changed by newcomers and by exchange with other countries.

Safety, Security and the Pandemic

Event (check each)	Effect on festivals
Love Parade, Duisburg, 2010	A crowd crush killed 21 people. The parade ended, and large events must have safety plans for crowd flow and exits.
Cologne, New Year's Eve 2015	Large groups of men carried out sexual assaults and thefts around the main station. It led to a national debate and to stronger policing of large public events.
Berlin Christmas market, 2016	A lorry was driven into the market at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin on 19 December 2016, killing twelve people. Markets since then have concrete barriers, vehicle controls and more police.
Pandemic, 2020 to 2021	Christmas markets, carnival and Oktoberfest were cancelled or restricted. Oktoberfest was cancelled in 2020 and 2021, and the festival had been cancelled before for wars and epidemics (check).

The cancellations showed how much of local business depends on festivals, and the return of events in 2022 was widely reported as a revival (check). Safety rules are a permanent part of the festival year now, and some visitors and organisers find them heavy-handed while others find them essential.

Energy, Waste and the Climate

- **Lights.** In the energy crisis of 2022 some cities reduced Christmas lighting or the opening hours of markets to save energy, a decision that caused public argument (check).
- **Fireworks.** New Year's Eve fireworks produce fine dust and pollution in the first hours of the year, and injuries and the stress to animals. Cities have set limited zones, and campaigners and some police unions have called for a general ban, while others defend the custom (check the current rules and positions).
- **Mugs and packaging.** Deposit mugs for Glühwein, reusable plates and bans on single-use plastic at events are part of environmental rules (check).
- **The Christmas tree.** Debates over cut trees, plantations and artificial trees appear every year (check).

New Festivals, New Habits

- **Public viewing.** Large outdoor screens for football tournaments, called "public viewing" in German, became a mass habit at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, with flags and street parties that many commentators described as a more relaxed form of patriotism (check). It is a recent festival with its own rituals.
- **Music and subculture events.** The Gothic festival in Leipzig, the Love Parade and Wacken (Chapter 6) show how new communities build festivals that then claim tradition.
- **Digital life.** Streams of carnival and Christmas concerts, photographs on social media and online booking have changed how festivals look and who attends (check).
- **Revival.** Some old customs have been revived by local groups, supported by local heritage funding, even where the line of descent was broken (check examples).

Who Owns a Tradition?

> **Heritage lists**
>
> Germany joined the UNESCO convention on intangible cultural heritage in 2013, and maintains a national register of living traditions, to which communities can apply (check the details and which customs are listed). Being listed brings attention and sometimes funding, and it turns a custom into an official "heritage", which can change how it is run

and described. The register is a modern tool for a question the whole course has asked: who decides that a custom is a tradition, and on what evidence?

A British comparison

Edinburgh has the same tension in a sharper form. The Festival Fringe, Hogmanay and the Christmas market bring many visitors, and residents have argued about crowds, short-term lets and the cost of living in the city centre. A visitor levy for overnight stays was approved in Scotland in 2024 (check when it starts). The German question, whether the festival belongs to the people who live there or to those who visit, is just as familiar in Edinburgh.

Check the details

This chapter covers current events and political debates, which change quickly. Figures on visitors, rules for events, holidays and security measures should be checked against current official sources. Where the text describes a debate, it reports the positions and does not settle them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one festival from the course and list the pressures it faces today (money, safety, climate, new communities), with one source you would use to check each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Write a balanced two-paragraph account of the debate over New Year's Eve fireworks, giving the best argument on each side and noting what evidence is needed.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare how Edinburgh and a German city balance festival tourism against residents' interests, and suggest two measures that both could use.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Tourism:** millions of visitors; money and risk of a stage-set festival
- **New communities:** Eid, Hanukkah, the Karneval der Kulturen in Berlin
- **Safety:** Duisburg 2010, Cologne 2015, Berlin 2016, pandemic cancellations
- **Climate:** lights, fireworks, mugs and packaging
- **Heritage:** UNESCO convention (Germany from 2013) and a national register (check)

The German Festival Year

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Round the Year Again

Nine chapters have walked from Advent to the November Sundays, and the same question has kept returning: how old is this, really, and who says so? This capstone gathers the answers. It sorts the festivals into inherited, revived and invented, sets out the year on one page, collects the myths and the evidence against them, and gives a six-question method that works for any claim about an "ancient" custom, in Germany or at home. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Three Kinds of Tradition

Inherited

A custom with a continuous, documented history, even if it has changed along the way: St Nicholas on 6 December, pre-Lent carnival revelry, harvest thanks, the winter fair (check each).

Revived

A custom that lapsed and was brought back, often with new elements and a claim to age: some local masked parades, village festivals brought back by heritage groups, Edinburgh's Beltane in a Scottish parallel (check examples).

Invented

A custom created at a known time, often with an old-sounding story: Oktoberfest in 1810, the Cologne carnival's modern form in 1823, German Unity Day in 1990, German Halloween in the 1990s, *Dinner for One* as a ritual in the 1970s (check each date).

Most festivals are mixtures: an old seasonal or church date, a nineteenth-century shape given by clubs and tourist boards, and a recent layer of commerce. The useful question is not "is it real?" but "which layer am I looking at?"

The Year on One Page

Season (check each)	Main festivals	Dominant layer
Advent and winter (Ch 2, 3)	Advent, St Nicholas, markets, Christmas, Silvester, *Dinner for One*	Church year plus a strong 19th- and 20th-century family and commercial layer
Late winter (Ch 4)	Three Kings, carnival, Fasnacht	Medieval pre-Lent revelry reshaped by 19th-century clubs
Spring (Ch 5)	Easter, Walpurgis Night, 1 May, Ascension Day	Church and folk customs with later literary, labour and tourist layers
Summer (Ch 6)	Schützenfest, Kirmes, wine festivals, harbour events, music and Pride events	Club, town and company festivals, many from the 1800s and 1900s
Autumn (Ch 7)	Oktoberfest, Erntedank, St Martin, Reformation Day, Halloween	Mixed: religious, civic and imported
Remembrance (Ch 8)	Unity Day, 9 November, 27 January, Volkstrauertag, Totensonntag	Civic and church days shaped by 20th-century history

Myths and Evidence

Common claim	What the course found (check each)
The Christmas tree is a German invention.	Earliest descriptions from the Upper Rhine in the 1500s and 1600s; a custom that grew, not a dated invention (Chapter 2).
Everyone in Germany watches *Dinner for One*.	A British sketch recorded for German television in 1963, a ritual from the 1970s; "everyone" is not shown (Chapter 3).
Carnival is an ancient pagan survival.	Medieval pre-Lent revelry is recorded, modern forms are largely from the 1800s, and a pagan origin is claimed, not shown (Chapter 4).
Walpurgis Night is an old pagan festival.	The saint, the witch folklore, Goethe and Harz tourism are separate layers; the pagan link is claimed (Chapter 5).
Hamburg's port is celebrated on a real 1189 charter.	The charter is a later forgery; the festival is modern (Chapter 6).

Common claim	What the course found (check each)
Oktoberfest is centuries old.	It dates from 1810, about two hundred years, with later changes (Chapter 7).
Unity Day is the day the Wall fell.	It marks the treaty of 3 October 1990, and 9 November was avoided as a date of both joy and shame (Chapter 8).

A Six-Question Method

1. **Who says it?** A historian, a tourist board, a club, a brewery or a book of folklore?
2. **What is the earliest written record?** A document from the time, or a later retelling?
3. **When was it written?** Near the custom, or long after?
4. **What is the definition?** Does "the same custom" mean the same practice, the same name or just a similar act?
5. **Who gains?** Does the claim help a town, a brand, a church, a party or a national story?
6. **What would change my mind?** What evidence would show the claim to be false?

A worked example

Claim: "The Easter bunny is an ancient pagan fertility symbol, linked to a goddess called Eostre." Apply the method. Who says it? Popular articles and some books. Earliest record: a writer, Bede, mentions an English spring month named after a goddess Eostre, but nothing there mentions hares or eggs, and the earliest German written mention of an Easter hare bringing eggs is from 1682. When written: the bunny sources are centuries after the supposed pagan period. Definition: a hare as a fertility symbol in general is not the same as an unbroken custom of an Easter egg-bringer. Who gains? Writers and sellers who like a mysterious past. What would change my mind? A dated source showing the egg-bringing hare earlier than the 1600s. Result: "The Easter hare is documented in Germany from the 1600s, and an ancient pagan origin is claimed but not shown" (check Bede's text and the 1682 reference).

A British comparison

The same method can be pointed at home. Hogmanay's first-footing, the Highland games, Burns Night, Up Helly Aa and the Beltane Fire Festival each have a mix of old roots and later shaping, and the questions of earliest record, definition and who gains apply to each.

A German visitor might be surprised that tartan, as a national costume, owes a great deal to 19th-century romance (check). It is a useful habit to be as sceptical of one's own traditions as of someone else's.

Check the details

This course is an overview from general knowledge, and nearly every date and figure is marked "check". The list of flagged items at the end of each chapter is a starting point for fact-checking and further reading. Customs differ by region, rules and holidays change, and many origin stories are contested, so treat all of them as claims until you have seen the source.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose six festivals from the course and sort each as inherited, revived or invented (or a mix), giving the evidence and how sure you are.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Apply the six-question method to the claim "Christmas markets are a medieval tradition" and write a careful replacement sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the same method to a Scottish custom of your choice (Hogmanay, Burns Night, the Highland games or another) and say how far it holds up.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Three kinds:** inherited, revived, invented (most festivals mix them)
- **The key question:** which layer am I looking at?
- **The test:** the earliest written record, and who wrote it
- **The method:** who, record, when, definition, who gains, what would change my mind
- **The habit:** mark unproven origins as "claimed", and apply it at home too

Course complete

You have finished *The German Festival Year*: the layered calendar, Advent and the Christmas markets, Christmas, Silvester and *Dinner for One*, carnival and Fasnacht, Easter and May Day, the summer fairs, the autumn festivals, the days of remembrance, the pressures on festivals today, and the method for testing claims of age. Related courses include *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot*, *German Music*, *German Film & Television*, *German Literature* and *German Cars & the Autobahn*.