

GERMAN CULTURE COURSE

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Wordplay, cabaret, Loriot, satire and the limits of the joke: testing the stereotype.

10 Chapters

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German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

"The Germans have no sense of humour" is one of the most repeated stereotypes in Britain. It is also one of the easiest to test, because Germany has a large and well-documented comedy tradition: tricksters of the Middle Ages, satirical magazines, Berlin cabaret, Karl Valentin, Loriot, Otto and a busy modern stand-up scene. This first chapter sets out where the stereotype comes from, what we mean by humour, why German thinkers wrote so much about the joke, why jokes travel badly, and how the course will answer the question with evidence. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Where the Stereotype Comes From

Outside views

British and American jokes and films often show Germans as stiff, humourless and rule-bound. Such national stereotypes tend to be about neighbours and former rivals, and they say more about the speaker than about the target (check examples).

Inside views

Germans also say it of themselves, sometimes proudly, sometimes ruefully. A saying that "there is nothing to laugh about" in serious matters sits beside a lively comic culture (check the saying).

The war's shadow

After 1945 the Nazi past made some kinds of joke difficult or forbidden in Germany, and foreign audiences often saw Germans through war films, which shaped the picture (check). The British sitcom *Fawlty Towers* made fun of this in its 1975 episode "The Germans" (check).

A claim, not a fact

"Germans have no sense of humour" is a generalisation about some eighty million people. A careful reader asks what would count as evidence for or against it: surveys, the existence

> and popularity of comedy, the kinds of jokes people tell, or the freedom to tell them. This course looks at all of those, and does not accept the claim or reject it in advance.

What Counts as Humour?

Term (check each)	Meaning
Humor	A good-natured, tolerant amusement at human weakness. The word and the idea were borrowed from English in the 18th century (check). In German it often has a warm, forgiving tone.
Witz	A joke or a quick bit of wit; also a clever remark. It can also mean "wit" as a talent. The word is related to "wisdom" and "knowing".
Spott and *Satire*	Mockery, aimed at a target. Satire attacks folly or abuse of power, often through exaggeration.
Ironie	Saying one thing and meaning another; in German writing it also has a serious philosophical sense, as in the Romantic irony of the early 1800s (check).
Komik and *Klamauk*	The comic, from subtle to slapstick (*Klamauk* is noisy clowning).
Schadenfreude	Pleasure at another's misfortune. The word is German and has been borrowed into English, which is partly why the idea is thought of as German (check).

The course uses "humour" broadly, to cover the joke, the comic character, satire, cabaret, comedy on television and in film, and the political joke. It treats all of them as evidence of what people found funny and what they were allowed to say.

The Germans Who Wrote About Laughter

- **Kant (1790).** In the *Critique of Judgment* Immanuel Kant described laughter as an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing (check the wording). It is an early statement of the idea that jokes depend on surprise and mismatch.
- **Jean Paul (1804).** The novelist Jean Paul wrote a long and influential discussion of humour in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, treating humour as a mix of the great and the small (check).
- **Schopenhauer (1819).** Developed the idea of incongruity, a mismatch between what is expected and what is observed (check).

- **Freud (1905).** The Vienna doctor Sigmund Freud published *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*), which treats jokes as a release of suppressed feeling (check).
- **Why it matters.** The stereotype may owe something to this: a culture that writes learned theories of laughter can seem to treat it too seriously. The theories show interest in humour, not a lack of it.

Serious Culture and Light Culture

- **"E" and "U."** German cultural life has long divided "serious" art (*E-Kultur*, from *ernst*) from "entertainment" (*U-Kultur*, from *Unterhaltung*), a distinction found in music, publishing and broadcasting (check). Comedy was often placed on the lighter side.
- **Consequences.** This may have made it harder for comedians to be taken seriously by critics, and easier for foreigners to see only the serious side. It also made satire an important space for criticism, as later chapters show.
- **A change.** By the late 20th century the line was less sharp, and comic writers such as Loriot and cabaret artists were respected as authors (check).

Why Jokes Travel Badly

- **Language.** Puns and wordplay rest on sounds and double meanings, and rarely survive translation. A German pun on a compound word may need a paragraph to explain, and the explanation kills it.
- **Context.** Jokes about politicians, regions, television programmes or history need background knowledge that an outsider lacks.
- **Style.** British humour often relies on understatement, irony and embarrassment; German comedy may rely more on exact absurd logic, wordplay and satire (check; these are generalisations, with many exceptions).
- **The consequence.** If you do not understand German comedy, it is easy to conclude that it does not exist. That is a fault of translation, not of the comedy.

Scope of the Course

Part (check)	Chapters	Topics
Words and early comedy	2, 3	The vocabulary of the joke; Eulenspiegel, Heine, Busch, the satirical magazines
Cabaret and the absurd	4, 5	Cabaret between the wars, Karl Valentin
Under dictatorship	6	Jokes in the Nazi years and the GDR
Postwar and today	7, 8, 9	Loriot, television comedy, the limits of the joke
The answer	10	The stereotype tested against the evidence

The course is Germany-centred. It describes jokes and sketches rather than reproducing them at length, and it covers the Nazi years and the GDR factually, with the focus on what is documented. It does not try to be a joke collection.

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
Germans have no sense of humour.	What counts as evidence, and what does the record of German comedy show? (Chapters 2 to 10)
German jokes are all about wordplay and puns.	Which kinds of jokes are common, and what other forms exist? (Chapters 2 to 5)
You cannot joke about the Nazi past in Germany.	What has been done, by whom, and with what reaction? (Chapter 9)
People under dictatorships told jokes freely.	What were the risks, and what is documented? (Chapter 6)
Cabaret is a purely political form.	What was cabaret in Berlin and Munich, and who performed it? (Chapters 4 and 5)
British humour is witty and German humour is heavy.	Compared how, by whom, on what evidence? (Chapter 10)

Sources to Use

- **Museums and archives,** such as the German Cabaret Archive in Mainz, the Valentin-Karlstadt Museum in Munich, the Wilhelm Busch Museum in Hanover and the Caricatura museum in Frankfurt (check names and what is open).

- **The works themselves,** such as Loriot's sketches, recordings of cabaret and the satire programmes in broadcasters' media libraries, ideally watched with subtitles or a translation (check availability).
- **Histories of humour and satire,** by literary and media historians, which place the jokes in their time (check which are available in English).
- **Surveys and audience research,** where they exist, remembering that they measure what people say they like (check).
- **Biographies and memoirs,** read with care, because comedians' stories about themselves are often polished (check).

A British comparison

Scots know the experience from the other side: stereotypes of Scottish mean-ness or dourness, and the reply that Scotland has Billy Connolly, the Fringe and a long tradition of satire. In the same way the 1975 *Fawlty Towers* episode "The Germans" shows how a British comedy used the war-film image of Germans for laughs (check). Another German view of Britain is that British humour is dry and ironic and that Germans find it hard to read. The ability to joke about one's own stereotype is itself a sign of humour.

Check the details

Every name, date and quotation in this course comes from general knowledge and is marked "check" where uncertain. Many popular stories about comedians and jokes are retold without sources, so verify with biographies, histories and the works themselves before repeating them. Jokes are described or paraphrased here, not copied at length.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Write down three stereotypes you have heard about another country's humour, and for each say whether it is documented, claimed or unknown, and how you could check it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose two of the German terms in the table (*Humor*, *Witz*, *Spott*, *Ironie*, *Schadenfreude*) and explain how each differs from the nearest English word.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why a culture that writes many theories of humour might still be called humourless, and what a fair test of the stereotype would look like.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The stereotype:** "Germans have no sense of humour"; a generalisation to be tested
- **The words:** *Humor*, *Witz*, *Spott*, *Satire*, *Ironie*, *Schadenfreude*
- **The theorists:** Kant (1790), Jean Paul (1804), Schopenhauer (1819), Freud (1905), all check
- **E and U:** serious against entertainment culture, with comedy on the light side
- **The caution:** jokes translate badly, so absence in translation is not absence in German

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Words, Wit and Wordplay

The first test of the stereotype is the humblest one: do Germans tell jokes? They do, in great number, and the everyday joke tradition has recognisable genres, favourite targets and a love of wordplay that the language invites. This chapter looks at the pun and the "flat joke", at the comedy of long compound words (and what Mark Twain made of them), at words that have become famous abroad, and at the regional and group jokes that Germans tell about one another. Jokes are described by type here, not copied from collections. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Everyday Joke

The Witz

A short told joke with a set-up and a punchline. Joke-telling has a long place in German social life, from the pub regulars' table (*Stammtisch*) to the office and the family (check). Printed collections of jokes have sold for generations.

The formula

Many jokes open with a standard line, much as English has "A man walks into a bar". A German favourite begins "Treffen sich zwei ..." ("Two ... meet"), followed by a pair such as two hunters, with a deadpan twist at the end (check the formula and its history).

Anti-jokes

A joke that sets up an expectation and then delivers a flat, literal ending is a popular type, and is a close cousin of the English shaggy-dog and anti-joke (check). It depends on the listener knowing the usual pattern.

The Pun and the Flat Joke

Term (check each)	Meaning
Wortspiel	"Word play": the general word for a pun or play on words.
Kalauer	A pun, especially a weak or groan-inducing one. The origin of the word is uncertain: one explanation links it to the French *calembour*, another to the town of Calau in Brandenburg, and the town explanation is disputed (check).
Flachwitz	"Flat joke": a joke so slight that the only reaction is a groan or a sigh. It is the German counterpart of the English dad joke (check).
Treppenwitz	"Staircase joke": the clever reply that occurs to you too late, on the stairs as you leave. It matches the French *esprit de l'escalier* (check the origin).

- **Why the pun works.** German has many words that sound alike and many words built from smaller words, so double meanings are easy to find. A pun can turn on a prefix, a compound or a case ending, which makes them hard to translate (check).
- **The groan as reward.** As with the English pun, the groan is part of the pleasure, and the teller expects it.
- **Shop names.** Hairdressers' shops are famous for punning names, such as plays on "Haar" (hair) in the name of the salon. The habit is common enough to have been collected in books and photographs (check).

Long Words and Mark Twain

The Awful German Language

In 1880 the American writer Mark Twain, in an appendix to *A Tramp Abroad* titled "The Awful German Language", poked fun at German grammar: the genders, the cases, the verbs placed at the end of a clause and the long compound nouns. His remark that some German words are so long that they have a perspective is often quoted (check the wording). He was a comic writer, writing a comic essay, and the essay has itself been taken as evidence for or against German humour, which says more about readers than about Germany.

- **Compound nouns.** German builds long words by joining shorter ones, so a famous example such as *Donaudampfschifffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän* (captain of a Danube

steamship company) exists mostly as a game (check the word and its use). In practice such words are rarely used in full.

- **Words as comedy.** Collections of strange or long words, and of words with no English equivalent, are a standard type of popular book and internet list (check).
- **Examples abroad.** The word *Schadenfreude* has entered English, and lists often add words such as *Backpfeifengesicht* (a face that needs a slap) or *Kummerspeck* ("grief bacon", weight gained from emotional eating). These are real, playful words, though some are more used in lists than in speech (check).
- **The verb at the end.** A famous trick of German comedy and public speaking is to delay the verb of a long sentence to the very end, so that the meaning is held back until the last word.

Jokes About Regions and Groups

Group or place (check each)	The stereotype in the joke tradition
East Frisians	The people of East Frisia, in the north-west, are the traditional target of "slow-witted" jokes (*Ostfriesenwitze*), a genre comparable to the English Irish or Essex jokes. Defenders say that East Frisians tell them too.
Swabians	Regularly described in jokes as thrifty to the point of meanness (check; Scots will recognise the pattern).
Bavarians and Prussians	A jokey rivalry between southern and northern Germany: the Bavarian as easy-going and the Prussian as stiff, and the reply about the Bavarian as parochial (check).
Berliners	Known for a dry, quick, cheeky manner of speaking, sometimes called the "Berliner Schnauze" (check).
East and West	After 1990, jokes about Ossis and Wessis (easterners and westerners) formed a genre of their own, with each side as a stock figure (check).
Professions and children	Jokes about civil servants, doctors, teachers and the cheeky schoolboy "Fritzchen" (Little Fritz) are long-lived standard genres (check).

Jokes about groups raise a question that the course returns to in Chapter 9: who may tell them and about whom. Jokes of this type usually say more about the teller's idea of the group than about the group, and some are felt as insulting.

Understatement and Irony in Speech

- **"Nicht schlecht."** The phrase "not bad" can mean "very good", and "Da kann man nicht meckern" ("you can't complain") is a typical way to praise something, a habit that matches British understatement (check).
- **Irony in speech.** German speakers also use irony, and tone and context signal it. Outsiders who miss the signals may think the speaker is serious, which feeds the stereotype.
- **Dry and wry.** Dry humour is not an English monopoly. The question is how far a culture signals it and how readers recognise it (check).

What the Joke Tradition Shows

- **There is a rich everyday joke culture,** with genres, formulas, targets and collections.
- **Much of it is built on the language,** which makes it hard to translate and easy for outsiders to miss.
- **Some of it is unkind,** as joke traditions everywhere are, and it follows the same patterns as in Britain.
- **It does not settle the question,** because a joke habit is not the same as a comic tradition in art, but it removes the simplest form of the stereotype.

A British comparison

British comedy has the same ingredients. The pantomime pun, the cracker joke and the seaside postcard live on wordplay and groans, and Scotland has the Aberdeen mean-ness joke, the Glasgow and Edinburgh rivalry and the "patter" of a good storyteller (check). The East Frisian joke has its counterparts in Irish and other regional jokes that were once common in Britain and have become more contested. The comparison suggests that the two countries share the structure of the everyday joke and differ chiefly in language.

Check the details

Word origins (*Kalauer*, *Treppenwitz*), the Twain quotation, famous long words and joke genres are often retold with confidence and little evidence. Verify with a dictionary of etymology and with the works themselves. Group jokes are described here as a genre and not endorsed, and some are felt as offensive.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a table of five German joke genres from the chapter, with an English or Scottish counterpart for each and a note on what is lost in translation.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Read the Twain passage in the chapter and explain whether it is evidence that Germans have no sense of humour, evidence that Twain did, or neither.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare regional jokes in Germany with those in Britain: who are the targets, what is the stereotype in each, and who gets to tell them?

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Genres:** *Witz*, *Kalauer* (pun), *Flachwitz* (flat joke), anti-joke, *Treffen sich zwei* ...
- **Long words:** compounds; Twain's 1880 essay "The Awful German Language"
- **Famous words:** *Schadenfreude*, *Treppenwitz*, *Backpfeifengesicht*
- **Targets:** East Frisians, Swabians, Bavarians and Prussians, Berliners, Ossis and Wessis
- **Result:** a rich everyday joke culture, built on language and hard to translate

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Tricksters and Satirists to 1914

The German comic tradition does not begin with the cabaret. Printed jokes and clowning stories go back to the Renaissance, a great poet made irony his weapon, a cartoonist-poet gave the world a cautionary tale of two naughty boys, and in the decade before the First World War a Munich magazine was prosecuted for mocking the Kaiser. This chapter follows the tricksters, the fools, the liars and the satirists up to 1914, and it asks the course's usual question: what is documented, and what is legend? Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Till Eulenspiegel: The Trickster

The stories

Till Eulenspiegel is a peasant rogue who wanders through northern Germany playing tricks, usually by taking instructions literally. A collection of tales about him was printed in Strasbourg around 1510 to 1511 (check the printer and date), and was soon translated into other languages. The English name "Owlglass" comes from his German name.

A real man?

Tradition says that he lived in the early 1300s and died in Mölln, near Lübeck, where a gravestone is shown. Historians doubt that he can be identified as a real person, and treat the book as a collection of folk tales gathered around one name (check).

Why it matters

The trickster who exposes the pompous by literal-mindedness is a basic comic pattern, with relatives in many countries. Eulenspiegel later inspired a tone poem by Richard Strauss (1895) and gave his name to an East German satire magazine (see Chapter 6, check).

Fools and Liars

- **The Schildbürger.** The citizens of the fictional town of Schilda do everything foolishly: they build a town hall without windows and then try to carry the daylight in on sacks. The book *Das Lalebuch* of 1597 told of a similar group of fools, and the Schilda stories were collected later (check the dates and the relation between the books). The word *Schildbürgerstreich* still means a foolish act.
- **Baron Münchhausen.** A real nobleman, Karl Friedrich Hieronymus von Münchhausen (1720 to 1797), was known for telling tall tales about himself. Rudolf Erich Raspe published an English collection of the stories in 1785, and the poet Gottfried August Bürger translated and expanded it for German readers in the following year (check). The Baron, who rides a cannonball and pulls himself out of a swamp by his own hair, became an international figure of the comic liar.
- **The tradition.** These are stories about foolishness, boasting and trickery, with no obvious political target. They show a taste for absurd logic and the unmasking of pretension that recurs later in the course.

Wit in the Age of Enlightenment

- **Lessing and the stage comedy.** Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767) is usually cited as the first great German comedy of the Enlightenment (check). Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochne Krug* (The Broken Jug, 1808) is a comic play still often performed, built on a village judge who is himself the culprit (check).
- **Lichtenberg's aphorisms.** Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742 to 1799), a professor in Göttingen, wrote short, sharp observations on life and people that were collected after his death and have remained admired for their wit (check).
- **The tone.** Much of this is the humour of reason: it takes pleasure in pricking pretension and in logical surprise.

Heinrich Heine: Irony as a Weapon

> **A poet under censorship**
>
> Heinrich Heine (1797 to 1856), born into a Jewish family in Düsseldorf and later baptised, wrote lyric poems that were set to music by many composers, and also biting prose and

verse satire against reaction, nationalism and pomposity. His long poem *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* (Germany. A Winter's Tale, 1844) mocks the Prussian state and German patriotism (check). Censorship in the German states, after measures such as the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, limited what could be printed, and Heine lived in Paris from 1831 (check). His method of ironic understatement and sudden deflation is often considered the finest example of German satirical writing, and his works were later burned and banned under the Nazis (check).

Heine shows that German irony was a practised and sophisticated art by the 1800s, and that it often took a political form because open criticism was dangerous.

Wilhelm Busch and the Children's Cautionary Tale

Work (check each)	Note
Struwwelpeter (1845)	By Heinrich Hoffmann, a doctor in Frankfurt. A collection of illustrated verse stories in which naughty children suffer grotesque punishments. Mark Twain made an English version as *Slovenly Peter* (check).
Max und Moritz (1865)	By Wilhelm Busch (1832 to 1908). Seven pranks by two boys, who are finally ground up in a mill and eaten by ducks. The verse is brisk, the drawings are lively and the tone is darkly comic.
Other Busch works	Busch also wrote *Hans Huckebein* (a raven) and *Die fromme Helene* (1872), a satire on a hypocrite, which was attacked by some critics for mocking piety (check).
Influence	The American cartoonist Rudolph Dirks created *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1897) in the tradition of *Max und Moritz*, and Busch is often seen as a forerunner of the comic strip (check).

The cautionary tale combines moral instruction with a relish for the disaster. It is comic cruelty with a stated moral, a mix that British readers may know from Hilaire Belloc and Roald Dahl.

The Satirical Magazines

Magazine (check each)	Note
Fliegende Blätter	Munich, founded 1845. Gentle, illustrated humour about middle-class life, with many cartoons, running until 1944.
Kladderadatsch	Berlin, founded 1848. A political satirical weekly with a mostly nationalist and conservative drift, running until 1944.
Simplicissimus	Munich, founded 1896 by the publisher Albert Langen, with a red bulldog as emblem. The sharpest of the three, with drawings by Thomas Theodor Heine and others, and contributions from leading writers.

Mocking the Kaiser: The "Palästina" Case

- **The offence.** German law punished insults to the monarch as *Majestätsbeleidigung* (lèse-majesté) (check). A person who mocked the Kaiser risked prison.
- **The 1898 issue.** In 1898 *Simplicissimus* published a special issue satirising Kaiser Wilhelm II's journey to Palestine, with a cartoon by Heine and a poem by Frank Wedekind. The authorities seized the issue and charged the artist, the poet and the publisher (check the details).
- **The result.** Reports say Heine was sentenced to a term of fortress imprisonment, Wedekind served a prison term, and Langen fled to Switzerland before returning (check the sentences and dates). The affair made the magazine famous.
- **What it shows.** Satire existed and was popular, and it also met a legal limit. In the German Empire a joke about the head of state could be a crime.

> **A British comparison**
>
> Britain's best-known magazine, *Punch*, was founded in 1841 and developed a tame, middle-class humour, while earlier cartoonists such as James Gillray had mocked kings and prime ministers with few legal consequences after the 1790s (check). In Scotland Robert Burns wrote satires such as "Holy Willie's Prayer" (1785), which attacked religious hypocrisy and circulated in manuscript before printing (check). The comparison shows two things: that British freedom to mock rulers was greater than German, and that both countries had a strong tradition of satire against hypocrisy.

Check the details

Stories about Eulenspiegel, Münchhausen and the Simplicissimus affair are often retold with confidence and little evidence. Dates of first printings, sentences and the lines of poems are specific facts that should be checked in a reliable edition or history. Treat anecdotes about authors as claims until a source is named.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a table of four comic figures or works from the chapter, with the date of the earliest printing, the type of humour and one point on which the legend is stronger than the evidence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Heine used irony and indirection, and what a modern reader needs to know to understand a poem of his.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Use the six-question method (who, record, when, definition, who gains, what would change my mind) on the claim "German satire did not exist until the cabaret", and write a careful replacement sentence.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Eulenspiegel:** trickster tales printed c. 1510 to 1511; the man is legend (check)
- **Fools and liars:** the Schildbürger, Münchhausen (Raspe 1785, Bürger 1786, check)
- **Heine:** irony under censorship; *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* (1844)
- **Busch:** *Max und Moritz* (1865); a forerunner of the comic strip
- **Magazines:** *Fliegende Blätter*, *Kladderadatsch*, *Simplicissimus* (the 1898 "Palästina" case)

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Cabaret Between the Wars

For many foreigners "German cabaret" means a film with a bowler hat and a stage-door nightclub. The real thing was smaller, funnier and more political: a room with a piano, a master of ceremonies, a few performers and an audience close enough to hear every barbed line. This chapter follows cabaret from its start in 1901 through the Weimar Republic to its closure and control after 1933, and sets the real Berlin beside the one in the film. The Nazi period is covered factually: the focus is on what was documented, on the risks performers took, and on those who were driven out or killed. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

What Cabaret Is

The form

A programme of short items in a small venue: topical songs (*Chansons*), sketches, monologues and parody, linked by a master of ceremonies, the *Conférencier*, who comments on events and the audience (check the term). It differs from variety (*Varieté*) and the large revue by its small scale and its topical, often political, edge.

The French model

The form came from the Chat Noir in Paris, opened in 1881, a Montmartre cabaret of songs and shadow plays (check). German imitators opened from 1901.

The word

In German, *Kabarett* means the literary-political stage form. The word is not used for a nightclub, which is how English speakers often meant it (check). German cabaret is closer to a satirical review than to a floor show.

The First German Cabarets, 1901

Venue (check each)	Note
Überbrettl, Berlin	Opened in January 1901 by Ernst von Wolzogen, who took the French idea. The name plays on Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and *Brettl*, the word for a small stage. It was short-lived but gave the form its start.
Schall und Rauch, Berlin	Founded in 1901 by actors including the future theatre director Max Reinhardt, with a more literary and parodic character.
Die Elf Scharfrichter, Munich	"The Eleven Executioners", opened in 1901, a Munich cabaret whose performers appeared in red robes and masks. Frank Wedekind was one of its performers (check).

Cabaret thus arrived in the same years as *Simplicissimus* (Chapter 3), and from the same Munich and Berlin circles of writers and artists. Another famous cabaret was the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916, where the Dada movement began (check), though it belongs more to art history.

Weimar Berlin: The Golden Years

- **The setting.** After 1918 the Weimar Republic gave Berlin a freer press and stage, and a large audience in a city of millions. Dozens of cabarets and revues opened (check the number).
- **Kabarett der Komiker.** Opened in 1924 on the Kurfürstendamm by Kurt Robitschek and Paul Morgan, as a larger, more commercial venue (check).
- **Political and literary cabaret.** Venues such as Rosa Valetti's *Größenwahn* (1920) and Trude Hesterberg's *Wilde Bühne* (1921) mixed songs by leading writers with sharp comment on the republic (check).
- **Die Katakombe.** Founded in 1929 by Werner Finck and colleagues in a cellar in Berlin. Finck became the leading master of ceremonies, known for hints, pauses and half-sentences that let the audience supply the meaning (check).
- **The songs.** The composer Friedrich Hollaender, the singer Claire Waldoff and the composer Mischa Spoliansky are among the names associated with the period's songs (check).

Kurt Tucholsky

"What may satire do?"

Kurt Tucholsky (1890 to 1935) was a journalist and writer who wrote for the weekly *Die Weltbühne* under his own name and four pseudonyms, and supplied lyrics for cabaret songs (check). In 1919, in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, he published an article titled "Was darf die Satire?" ("What may satire do?"), whose answer is "Alles" ("Everything") (check the date and the wording). The sentence has become the best-known statement of the German view of satire's freedom. Tucholsky left Germany, lived in Sweden, and died there in 1935 (check). His books were burned and banned in 1933.

- **The limits in Weimar.** Satire was freer than before 1918 but not free. In 1931 the editor of *Die Weltbühne*, Carl von Ossietzky, was convicted of treason for an article about secret rearmament, and later received the Nobel Peace Prize for 1935 while in a Nazi camp (check the details).
- **Who the target was.** The cabaret mocked militarism, judges, the clergy, nationalism and the republic's own politicians, and was not uniformly left-wing, though its leading writers mostly were (check).

The Real Berlin and the Film

Work (check each)	Note
The Blue Angel (1930)	The film with Marlene Dietrich as a nightclub singer and Emil Jannings as a teacher, directed by Josef von Sternberg. Its setting is a seedy club, not a literary cabaret.
Goodbye to Berlin (1939)	Christopher Isherwood's stories of the city, which became the stage musical *Cabaret* (1966) and the film (1972) (check).
The effect	For most English-speaking audiences, "Weimar cabaret" means these works: decadence and nightclub numbers. The historical Berlin cabaret was largely word-based and topical, and the audiences were varied (check).

After 1933

- **The takeover.** After the Nazi seizure of power in January 1933, Jewish and left-wing performers lost their jobs or fled, and cabaret was brought under the new Reich Chamber of Culture, set up in autumn 1933 (check). The satirical edge was removed, and performers who did not conform risked their livelihoods or worse.
- **Die Katakombe closed.** In 1935 Werner Finck's cabaret was closed by the authorities, and Finck and colleagues were arrested and held for some weeks in a concentration camp, at Esterwegen, before release (check the details). He was later banned from performing and conscripted (check).
- **Exile.** The writer Erika Mann founded *Die Pfeffermühle* in Munich in January 1933, left Germany soon after the Nazi takeover, and took the show to Switzerland and then to America (check).
- **Persecution.** Many Jewish cabaret artists were driven out, imprisoned or killed. The Vienna performer Fritz Grünbaum died in Dachau in 1941, and the actor and director Kurt Gerron was forced to direct a propaganda film in Theresienstadt and was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944 (check the details).
- **The ghetto stage.** Prisoners in Theresienstadt, a camp used for propaganda, staged cabaret evenings, which is well documented and often discussed by historians as a form of resistance and of coping (check).
- **A controlled "cabaret."** Light entertainment under the name of cabaret continued under Nazi supervision, with mild jokes and no real satire.

A British comparison

British cabaret, in the sense of political and satirical shows, owes a recognised debt to the German form. The Establishment Club, opened in London in 1961 by Peter Cook, was modelled on Berlin cabaret (check), and the revue *Beyond the Fringe* began at the 1960 Edinburgh Festival (check). The British satire boom of the early 1960s, including *That Was the Week That Was*, followed. The comparison shows that German cabaret was exported and that the freedom it needed was a political question as much as a comic one.

Check the details

Dates of venues, quoted sentences, arrests and deaths are specific facts and several differ between sources. Verify in a reliable history of German cabaret and of the Nazi period, and with the German Cabaret Archive in Mainz. Treat anecdotes about performers as claims until a source is named.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the difference between German cabaret as a stage form and the nightclub of the film *Cabaret*, using at least three points.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Use the six-question method on Tucholsky's sentence "What may satire do? Everything," and say what it does and does not show.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe what happened to cabaret artists after 1933 under three headings (closure and control, exile, persecution), giving one documented example for each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The form:** small stage, *Conférencier*, songs, sketches, topical comment
- **Start:** Überbrettl, Schall und Rauch (Berlin) and Die Elf Scharfrichter (Munich), 1901
- **Weimar:** Tucholsky, Finck, Hollaender; "Was darf die Satire? Alles" (1919)
- **The film:** *The Blue Angel* and *Cabaret* show a nightclub, not the political stage
- **After 1933:** closure, exile (*Die Pfeffermühle*), persecution and murder

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Karl Valentin and Munich's Absurd

If one comedian could be offered as the answer to the stereotype, it would be Karl Valentin: a gangling Munich performer who took a sentence apart like a clock and showed that the pieces would not go back together. He worked in the beer halls and variety theatres of Munich, in short films and on the stage with his partner Liesl Karlstadt, and writers such as Bertolt Brecht admired him. This chapter looks at his comedy of language and logic, at the folk-stage tradition he came from, at his influence, and at the myths that have gathered around his life. Sketches and lines are described, with only short, attributed quotations. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Man and the Partnership

Valentin

Born Valentin Ludwig Fey in Munich in 1882 and died in 1948 (check). He took the stage name Karl Valentin and became a tall, thin, solemn-faced performer who wrote nearly all his own material. He was also a musician, an inventor of gadgets and a collector, and ran a small museum of oddities (check).

Liesl Karlstadt

Born Elisabeth Wellano in 1892, she became his stage partner from about 1911 and played comic roles in his sketches, including male parts, with sharp timing (check). Much of the team's best work dates from their partnership, which lasted into the 1930s and early 1940s (check).

The setting

Munich's variety stages, beer halls and small theatres, where short sketches and songs were performed before a mixed audience. The tradition had its roots in the Munich *Volkssänger*, the folk singers who performed topical songs and jokes in the pubs (check).

The Comedy of Language and Logic

Method (check each)	What it looks like
Literal-mindedness	A character takes an expression at its word, or insists on the exact meaning of a phrase, until the conversation stops making sense. The comedy is that the logic is correct and the result is absurd.
Pedantic argument	Two people argue over the proper way to do an everyday thing, such as photographing, binding a book or rehearsing an orchestra, and the argument grows more elaborate than the task.
Misunderstanding	A word is misheard or confused with a similar one, and the dialogue runs on two tracks at once.
Dialect	Valentin's Munich speech was part of the comedy, which makes translation especially hard and means that many foreigners meet him only through descriptions (check).
The body and the prop	His thin frame, his stiff posture and his inventive use of props gave a visual comedy that does not need words, which is why some compare him to silent comedians (check).

Lines people quote

Three remarks are widely attributed to Valentin, though their exact wording and source should be checked: "Mögen hätt' ich schon wollen, aber dürfen hab' ich mich nicht getraut" (roughly, "I would have liked to want, but I did not dare to be allowed to"); a remark about being happy when it rains, because if he is not happy it rains anyway; and "Kunst ist schön, macht aber viel Arbeit" ("Art is beautiful, but it is a lot of work") (check each). The first piles up modal verbs until the sentence collapses, which shows the method: grammar followed too faithfully becomes nonsense.

Sketches and Films

- **Stage sketches.** Titles often cited include *Im Photoatelier* (In the Photographer's Studio), *Die Orchesterprobe* (The Orchestra Rehearsal) and *Der Buchbinder Wanninger* (The Bookbinder Wanninger), in which a simple task becomes a confrontation of logic and language (check the titles and what each depicts). The sketches were short and performed repeatedly, with variations.

- **Films.** Valentin and Karlstadt appeared in a number of short and some longer films from the 1910s to the 1940s (check). The 1923 short *Mysterien eines Frisiersalons* (Mysteries of a Barber Shop), for which the young Bertolt Brecht and the director Erich Engel are credited, is the best-known (check).
- **A museum of his own.** Valentin opened a museum of curiosities in Munich in the 1930s, which was short-lived, and a Valentin-Karlstadt Museum now stands in a tower of the old Isartor gate (check the dates).

Munich's Comic Tradition

- **Volkssänger and the beer hall.** Pub entertainers sang local songs and told stories in dialect, with an audience that answered back (check).
- **Ludwig Thoma.** The Bavarian writer Ludwig Thoma (1867 to 1921), a contributor to *Simplicissimus* (Chapter 3), wrote stories and plays full of rural and small-town satire, including the boyhood stories *Lausbubengeschichten* (1905) (check). His later nationalism and antisemitic writings are a troubling part of his record (check).
- **The grumbler.** Bavarian humour has a type known as the *Grantler*, a gruff complainer whose grumbling is a form of affection and wit (check). Valentin's solemn, complaining figures belong in this tradition.
- **Later Munich comedy.** Television series such as *Der Komödienstadl*, begun in the 1950s, carried the Bavarian folk comedy into the broadcast age, in a gentler form (check).

Brecht, Beckett and the Absurd

- **Brecht.** The young Brecht, then in Munich, admired Valentin and credited him as an influence on his own theatre (check). He is said to have learned from Valentin's cool, unemotional way of performing and from the use of comedy to break an illusion (check).
- **Later writers.** Critics have compared Valentin's breakdown of language to the work of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, and to later comedians such as Loriot (Chapter 7). Whether Beckett saw Valentin perform, as is sometimes said, is a claim, and should be checked (check).
- **Why the comparison.** What links them is a view that language and reason fail in everyday life, which is a common thread in 20th-century comedy and drama, from Munich to Paris to Edinburgh.

Life, Legend and Later Years

Claim (check each)	What is documented
"The German Chaplin."	A popular comparison, made by critics. The two worked in different traditions, one with silent film and one with spoken language. Treat it as a label.
Valentin starved to death after the war.	He died in February 1948, in poor circumstances after the war, apparently of pneumonia after a chill (check). The story that he died of hunger is a legend, though real postwar hardship is documented.
Valentin was neglected in his lifetime.	He was very popular in Munich and respected by artists, and had commercial setbacks, especially in the later 1930s and 1940s as taste and conditions changed (check).
Karlstadt's later life.	She suffered depression and difficult years after the partnership ended, and was later honoured for her part in the team (check). It is a reminder that the partnership was the creation of two people.

A British comparison

The closest British relatives are comedians who worked with literal-mindedness and the breakdown of language: the Goon Show of the 1950s with Spike Milligan, Ronnie Barker's "Four Candles" sketch for *The Two Ronnies* (1976), in which a shopkeeper keeps mishearing a customer's order, and the logic games of Monty Python (check each). Double acts such as Morecambe and Wise used the straight man and the fool in the way Valentin and Karlstadt did. A Scottish listener may think of the wordplay of a good Glasgow patter, translated into Bavarian.

Check the details

Stories about Valentin are often retold as anecdotes. Dates, sketch titles, film credits and the manner of his death vary between sources, and the quoted lines are widely attributed. Check them in a biography, in the Valentin-Karlstadt Museum's materials and in the collected works. Quotations are given here briefly and attributed, not reproduced at length.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe three comic methods used by Valentin and Karlstadt and explain why each is hard to translate.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Use the six-question method on the claim "Valentin starved to death in 1948", and write a careful replacement sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Valentin with a British comedian or sketch who plays on literal-mindedness, and say what is shared and what depends on the language.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Who:** Karl Valentin (1882 to 1948) and Liesl Karlstadt (1892 to 1960), Munich (check)
- **Method:** literal-mindedness, pedantic argument, misunderstanding, dialect, props
- **Tradition:** Munich Volkssänger, beer hall and variety stage
- **Influence:** admired by Brecht; compared with Beckett and Loriot (check)
- **Myths:** "German Chaplin", starvation death (legend)

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Laughing Under Dictatorship

Germany lived under two dictatorships in the twentieth century: the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945, and in the east the communist German Democratic Republic from 1949 to 1990. In both, humour about the rulers was risky and was nevertheless told. This chapter asks what is documented about jokes under dictatorship: what the law said, what happened to those who were caught, what official comedy was allowed, and whether the jokes were a form of resistance or only a release. It is written factually and with care: the aim is to understand what people did and what the regimes did, and not to make light of persecution. Jokes are described by type, not repeated. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Nazi Years: The Whispered Joke

The phenomenon

Jokes about the regime, its leaders and daily hardships circulated privately under the term *Flüsterwitz*, "whispered joke". Historians have collected them from diaries, reports, memoirs and the records of courts and of the secret state police (check). They were told among trusted friends and colleagues.

The law

A law of December 1934, the *Heimtückegesetz* ("Treachery Act"), made it an offence to make malicious or inflammatory statements about the regime or the Party (check the date and wording). Later wartime measures punished remarks that were said to undermine morale as "undermining military strength" (*Wehrkraftzersetzung*), and special courts and the People's Court tried such cases (check).

The risk

Records show that people were denounced by neighbours, colleagues and relatives for remarks and jokes, and that punishments ranged from warnings to imprisonment and, in some wartime cases, death (check the numbers, which are debated). Telling a joke

was therefore a real risk, though the risk varied with the time, the place and the listener.

What the jokes were about

Surviving collections show targets such as the leaders' vanity and appearance, shortages of food, the salute, informers and the secret police, and the course of the war (check). The jokes are valuable to historians because they show what ordinary people noticed and resented. Collections also contain jokes that reflect the antisemitic prejudices of the time; those are not reproduced here and should be read only in scholarly editions with commentary.

Official Comedy and Escape

- **Humour was not banned.** The Nazi regime promoted light entertainment, comedies and revues as part of its control of culture, especially in wartime when escapism was encouraged (check).
- **Film comedies.** Light comedies starring actors such as Heinz Rühmann, including *Die Feuerzangenbowle* (1944), were popular (check the details). Their popularity shows that audiences wanted to laugh, and that the regime wanted them to.
- **Propaganda humour.** The regime also used mockery as a weapon against its enemies, in cartoons and speeches. That was humour used for hatred, and it is part of the record, though not an example of free comic expression.
- **Foreign mockery.** Films made abroad, such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), mocked Hitler directly, and could not be shown in Germany at the time. It reached West German cinemas only in the 1950s (check).

The GDR: Official and Unofficial Humour

Institution (check each)	Note
Eulenspiegel magazine	The East German satirical weekly, founded in East Berlin in 1946 and later renamed after the trickster of Chapter 3. It published cartoons and jokes

Institution (check each)	Note
	within limits set by the state and Party, and still exists.
Die Distel	The East Berlin cabaret, founded in 1953, which was allowed to criticise inefficiency and minor abuses but not the leadership or the system. It also still exists.
Other cabarets	Cabarets in cities such as Leipzig and Dresden, including Die Herkuleskeule in Dresden (1955), played similar roles (check).
Television and comedy	East German television offered comedy and entertainment shows, and duos such as Herricht and Preil were popular (check).

- **"Constructive criticism."** Official satire was supposed to target shortcomings that the system could correct, such as waste or a rude shop assistant, and not the system itself (check).
- **The art of the hint.** Cabaret writers and performers learned to use double meanings, pauses and allusions, so the audience could hear what was not said. This echoed Werner Finck's technique in the 1930s (see Chapter 4).
- **Censorship and the Stasi.** Texts were reviewed by officials, and performances were watched by informers of the state security service, the Stasi. Archives opened after 1990 show reports on cabarets and their audiences (check). Performers could be banned or pressured.

The Political Joke in the GDR

- **Subjects.** Jokes about shortages and waiting lists (Chapter 8 of *German Cars & the Autobahn* covers the Trabant jokes), the Party leaders, the Stasi, the Soviet Union, and the gap between official claims and daily life (check).
- **Radio Eriwan.** A genre of question-and-answer jokes, in which a fictional Armenian radio station answers listeners' questions with an evasive "In principle yes, but..." They spread through the Soviet bloc, including East Germany, from the 1960s (check the origin and dates).
- **The leader's phrase.** A line attributed to Erich Honecker in 1989, that neither ox nor ass could stop socialism's course, was widely mocked in the weeks before the system fell (check the wording and date).

- **The risk.** The law punished "incitement against the state" and similar offences, and the Stasi collected reports of jokes. Records show that consequences existed but varied; jokes told in public to strangers were far riskier than jokes among friends (check).
- **After 1990.** The mixture of nostalgia and mockery for East German life, sometimes called *Ostalgie*, gave rise to films, shows and a debate about whether laughing at the GDR plays down its repression (check).

Resistance or Safety Valve?

View (check each)	The argument
Resistance	Telling a joke against the regime was a small act of defiance and a way to keep a sense of independence and shared values. Where punishments existed, it took courage.
Safety valve	Jokes let people release anger without acting. Some historians argue that they helped the regime by making it more bearable, so they were not a threat to it (check; the "Ventil" argument).
A mixture	Many historians conclude that jokes served several functions at once: bonding, relief, small defiance and information about what people thought. They also warn that a joke is not a political act in itself (check).

The honest conclusion is that jokes show what people thought, but cannot show how many people thought it, and that they were neither a movement nor an irrelevance. Studies of the Nazi joke include Hans-Jochen Gamm's work of the 1960s and Rudolph Herzog's more recent book *Dead Funny* (check the titles and dates).

> **A British comparison**
>
> British wartime humour could mock the enemy and the authorities openly: the radio comedy *ITMA*, soldiers' parodies of marching songs, and later *Dad's Army* (1968) and *'Allo 'Allo!* (1982) (check each). The difference is what the joke risked: a British comedian who mocked Churchill risked a bad review, while a German who mocked Hitler risked a denunciation. Scotland's own traditions of political satire, from Burns to the Edinburgh Fringe, developed in a country where mocking the rulers was legal.

Check the details

This chapter deals with persecution and political repression. The numbers of people prosecuted, the details of laws and the stories of individual cases differ between sources, and many retold stories are anecdotes. Verify in scholarly studies, in the records of the Federal Archives and the Stasi Records Archive, and treat any unsourced story of a person punished for a joke with caution.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Make a table comparing jokes and satire in the Nazi years and in the GDR: what was legal, what was allowed, what was risky and what is documented.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Use the six-question method on the claim "Political jokes brought down the East German regime", and write a careful replacement sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain how a historian can use a collection of whispered jokes as evidence, and what limits apply to that evidence.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Nazi years:** whispered jokes; Heimtückegesetz (1934); denunciation; official escapist comedy
- **GDR:** Eulenspiegel magazine, Die Distel, "constructive criticism", the Stasi, Radio Eriwan
- **Debate:** resistance, safety valve, or a mixture
- **Limit:** jokes show what people thought, not how many
- **Care:** unsourced stories of people punished for jokes are to be checked

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Loriot and the Comedy of Manners

Ask Germans which comedian best represents their humour and the answer, more often than not, is Loriot. A courteous, formally dressed man who drew cartoons and made television sketches, he turned ordinary politeness into a trap: two people try so hard to be correct that they cannot say what they mean, and a small mishap becomes a catastrophe. His lines are quoted in conversation, and some of his sketches are shown on television every year. This chapter looks at the man, the work, the method and the reasons he is loved. Sketches are described and only short, attributed lines are quoted. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Man Behind the Name

Vicco von Bülow

Born in 1923 in Brandenburg an der Havel, from an old noble family, and died in 2011 (check). He served as an officer in the Second World War, then studied art in Hamburg and worked as a graphic artist and cartoonist (check the details of his war service).

The pseudonym

"Loriot" is French for the oriole, a bird that appears in the Bülow family's coat of arms (check). He used it for his cartoons from the 1950s in the magazine *Stern* and elsewhere, and it became the name by which Germans know him.

The partner

The actress Evelyn Hamann (1942 to 2007) played opposite him in many of his television sketches from the late 1970s, and became one of Germany's best-loved comic actresses (check the dates). The pairing is often compared with a classic double act.

From Cartoons to Television

Work (check each)	Note
Cartoons	Drawings of round-nosed, bald and moustached men and their wives in everyday situations, often with a caption showing a polite exchange going wrong. Published in magazines and books from the 1950s.
Television programmes	He presented cartoon and sketch series on television from the late 1960s, followed by the series *Loriot* (1976 to 1978), made for Radio Bremen, in which he and Evelyn Hamann performed sketches that mix animated drawing and live action.
Films	The feature films *Ödipussi* (1988) and *Pappa ante portas* (1991), which he wrote, directed and starred in. They carry the sketch method into longer stories about a middle-aged man and the people around him.
Other	He also directed opera productions and wrote books, and a mock entry for an imaginary creature, the "Steinlaus" (stone louse), which he invented, made its way into a medical dictionary (check).

The Comedy of Manners

- **Politeness as a trap.** His characters speak in formal, correct language, use titles and the formal "Sie", and try to avoid offence. The harder they try, the more the conversation drifts out of control (check).
- **Small things, big results.** A breakfast egg cooked for the wrong time, a bath shared by two strangers, a quarrel over a table, or a dinner with a cheese plate becomes an occasion for quarrel, humiliation or absurdity.
- **Language that fails.** A character announces what he is going to say and then cannot say it, or speaks in a stock phrase that does not fit the occasion. Here Loriot is close to Valentin's breakdown of language (Chapter 5), but his setting is the polite middle-class home and not the Munich stage (check).
- **The mild tone.** His humour is gentle and affectionate towards his characters. The target is the form of conduct, not a political enemy or a social group.
- **Timing.** The comedy depends on pauses, glances and a perfectly serious face, which is why live performance and film carry it better than text.

Sketches People Know

Four sketches, described

The breakfast egg. A wife and husband disagree about how long the egg has been cooked, and a calm exchange about the answer turns into a domestic collision. The husband's remark that the egg is "hard" has become a catchphrase (check). **The bath.** Two formally dressed men, strangers, find themselves in the same small bathtub in a hotel and continue a courteous conversation as if nothing were unusual, with the duck, in the line often quoted, to remain outside the tub (check the details). **Christmas.** A family Christmas in which a grandfather's speech about how there used to be more tinsel is interrupted by the ordinary chaos of the occasion (check). **The television evening.** A couple's evening at home goes wrong because of a misunderstanding about the programme, the remote and what each wants.

The Christmas sketch is shown on German television most years, and for many families it is part of the season. In this respect it matches the New Year's Eve ritual of *Dinner for One*, discussed in *The German Festival Year*: a recorded comedy that has become a seasonal tradition, with the difference that Loriot's is German in origin (check how often and where it is shown).

Why His Lines Are Quoted

- **Everyday use.** People quote his lines in family and office conversations as a way of naming a situation, such as someone being too correct or a plan going quietly wrong (check examples).
- **A shared reference.** Because many Germans have seen the same sketches, a short phrase can call up the whole scene, much as a line from *Fawlty Towers* can in Britain.
- **Across generations.** His work is repeated on television and sold on disc and in books, and viewers of different ages know it (check the figures).
- **Respect.** He received honours, including state awards and honorary degrees, and is often treated as a national treasure (check the details). His death in 2011 was marked by many tributes.

What He Shows About the Stereotype

- **The stiff German is the joke.** Loriot's comedy takes the stereotype of formal, correct, repressed Germans and turns it on itself. The stereotype becomes material, and the laugh

is on the formality (check).

- **A humour of understatement.** His quiet, ironic and polite comedy is close to British humour, which suggests the contrast between the two countries is smaller than the stereotype says (check; compare Chapter 10).
- **Not representative alone.** Loriot is one strand. German comedy also includes loud slapstick, political satire and the stand-up of later decades (Chapter 8).

A British comparison

The nearest British relatives are the comedies of embarrassment and manners: *Fawlty Towers* (1975 and 1979), where Basil's attempts to keep up appearances collapse into disaster, *Keeping Up Appearances* (1990 to 1995) and the sketches of Alan Bennett (check each). Where Basil explodes, Loriot's characters stay calm, which is more restrained and perhaps closer to the English tradition of the stiff upper lip than to the Scottish. A viewer from Edinburgh might recognise the polite deadlock of an overcorrect conversation.

Check the details

Dates, titles of series, the names of sketches and the wording of quoted lines vary between sources, and several are widely misquoted. Verify with the official editions of his work and a reliable biography. Sketches are described here, not transcribed, and the lines quoted are brief and attributed.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one Loriot sketch from the chapter and explain in your own words how the comedy works: the setting, the mistake, the escalation and the ending.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Loriot and Basil Fawlty as comedians of manners: what is shared, what differs, and what each suggests about his country.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain how Loriot's work could be used as evidence for and against the stereotype that Germans are stiff and humourless.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Who:** Vicco von Bülow, "Loriot" (1923 to 2011); partner Evelyn Hamann (check)
- **Work:** cartoons from the 1950s; television series 1976 to 1978; films *Ödipussi* and *Pappa ante portas*
- **Method:** politeness as a trap; failed communication; understatement
- **Famous sketches:** the breakfast egg, the bath, Christmas at the Hoppenstedts (check)
- **Lesson:** the stiff German is his material, not his limit

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Television Comedy, Cabaret and Satire Since 1950

After 1945 German comedy had to start again. West Germany rebuilt its cabaret, found a generation of comedians for the new television, saw a blockbuster film comedy made by a comic from East Frisia, invented its own late-night and satire formats, and, from the 1990s, imported the stand-up club. East Germany developed its own entertainment (see Chapter 6). This chapter surveys the main strands since 1950: postwar cabaret and the political satire shows, the wordplay comedians, the big names of the 1970s to 1990s, the stand-up boom and a new generation with roots in migrant families, and the unlikely story of Monty Python in German. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Postwar Cabaret

A fresh start

Cabarets reopened in the years after 1945, among them Die Schaubude in Munich, with texts by the writer Erich Kästner, and Die Stachelschweine ("The Porcupines") in Berlin from 1949 (check). They had to rebuild an art that the Nazi regime had broken (Chapter 4).

Munich

Die Münchner Lach- und Schießgesellschaft ("Munich Laughing and Shooting Society"), founded in 1956 by Sammy Drechsel and Dieter Hildebrandt, became the best-known West German political cabaret (check). Hildebrandt (1927 to 2013) was its leading figure for decades.

Television

Hildebrandt later ran the satire programme *Scheibenwischer* ("Windscreen Wiper") on television from 1980 (check), which brought cabaret into the living room, and sometimes into conflict with broadcasters and politicians (check).

The Wordplay Tradition on Screen

- **Heinz Erhardt.** A comedian (1909 to 1979) who combined puns, nonsense verse and a mild manner. He starred in many film comedies from the 1950s and became a well-loved television performer. His poems of wordplay remain popular (check). He represents the pun tradition of Chapter 2 at its most polished.
- **Ritual comedy.** Recorded sketches, such as *Dinner for One*, filled the schedules of the new television in the 1960s and 1970s and shaped a shared repertoire (see *The German Festival Year*, Chapter 3).

Names of the 1970s to 1990s

Performer (check each)	Note
Otto Waalkes	Born in 1948 in Emden, East Frisia, which links him to the East Frisian jokes of Chapter 2. A comedian of silly songs, impersonations and visual gags, whose film *Otto – Der Film* (1985) was among the most successful German films of its time.
Dieter Hallervorden	Born in 1935, a comic known for television series such as *Nonstop Nonsens* (from 1975) and for the Berlin theatre and cabaret Die Wühlmäuse, which he took over (check). Later also a serious actor.
Helge Schneider	Born in 1955, a jazz musician and absurdist who performs improvised, rambling shows and films, known for the nonsense song "Katzeklo" (1993) (check).
Hape Kerkeling	Born in 1964, a comedian of disguise and television pranks, and later author of a bestselling book about walking the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela (check the title and date).
Anke Engelke	Born in 1965, a comic actress and presenter, with a long career in sketch shows and in dubbing work (check).
Michael "Bully" Herbig	Born in 1968, a Bavarian comedian whose western parody *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001) became one of the highest-grossing German films of its time (check).

These are a selection, not a canon. German television has also had many successful quiz and entertainment shows with comic elements, and the arrival of commercial channels in the mid-1980s (RTL, Sat.1) widened the market and produced new formats (check).

Satire on Screen

- ***extra 3*.** A satirical news magazine on the public channel NDR, running since the 1970s, which offers short pieces mocking politics and news (check the dates).
- ***Die Harald Schmidt Show*.** A late-night show on Sat.1 from the mid-1990s, modelled on American late-night television and notable for its ironic, sometimes provocative host (check the dates).
- ***heute-show*.** A weekly satirical programme on ZDF, in the style of a spoof news bulletin, begun in 2009 and presented by Oliver Welke (check). It is one of the best-known political satire formats on German television.
- ***Die Anstalt*.** A ZDF political cabaret show from 2007, known for dense, documentary-style sketches and for citing sources on screen (check).
- **Jan Böhmermann.** A satirist whose programmes since 2013 mix mock news and stunts, and whose 2016 poem about a foreign head of state led to a legal and diplomatic controversy (see Chapter 9, check).

The Stand-up Boom

Development (check each)	Note
Quatsch Comedy Club	Opened in Hamburg in the early 1990s by Thomas Hermanns, who brought the format of the English-language comedy club to Germany (check).
The 1990s and 2000s	Stand-up comedy grew quickly, with television showcases, regional clubs and stars such as Michael Mittermeier (check).
Stadium shows	The comedian Mario Barth, who tells jokes about relationships, sold out Berlin's Olympic stadium in 2008 (check the figure), a sign of how large the audience had become.
Comedians from migrant families	Performers such as Kaya Yanar, Bülent Ceylan and Fatih Çevikkollu draw on German-Turkish and other family backgrounds, with humour about stereotypes, family and identity (check). They show a changing country.

Monty Python in German

A German spin-off

In the early 1970s West German television commissioned two special episodes from the Monty Python team, which were recorded in Bavaria with the group performing parts in German, in some cases phonetically, and broadcast as *Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus* (check the details and dates). The episodes mix reworked Python material with new sketches (check the content), and are an unusual case of British comedians making a programme for the German public. The project is evidence of a two-way interest: a German audience that wanted British absurdity, and British comedians who wanted to try the German market.

A British comparison

The German formats have British cousins. *That Was the Week That Was* (1962) set the template for satirical news on television and *Have I Got News for You* (from 1990) is the long-running panel version (check), with the *heute-show* and *extra 3* as parallels. The stand-up clubs of London and Edinburgh were the model for Hermanns' Hamburg club, and the Edinburgh Fringe is the international test for comedians of both countries. The main difference is size: Germany's comedy market is large but split by language, region and channel.

Check the details

Dates, ratings, ticket figures and show titles change quickly and several of those above are from memory. Verify with the broadcasters' own pages and with reference works. The chapter names only a selection of performers, and people have different views about who should be on the list.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose three performers or programmes from the chapter and describe for each the type of humour, the era and a British counterpart.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain how the arrival of commercial television and of stand-up clubs changed German comedy, and what evidence you would use to show it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Use the Monty Python episodes as an example of cross-border comedy: what makes it work, what is lost, and what it shows about the stereotype.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Cabaret:** Die Schaubude, Die Stachelschweine, the Münchner Lach- und Schießgesellschaft (1956), *Scheibenwischer*
- **Wordplay:** Heinz Erhardt
- **Names:** Otto, Hallervorden, Helge Schneider, Kerkeling, Engelke, Herbig
- **Satire:** *extra 3*, *heute-show*, *Die Anstalt*, Böhmermann
- **Stand-up:** Quatsch Comedy Club; comedians from migrant families

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · The Limits of the Joke

Every comic culture has subjects it handles with care, and in Germany the question "what may a joke say?" has a particular history. The Nazi past, religion, minorities and foreign leaders have each produced arguments, court cases and, now and then, real anger. This chapter reports those debates and the law as they stand, without taking a side. It does not reproduce offensive jokes; it describes what kind of joke caused the argument and why. Details are from general knowledge and flagged "check", and nothing here is legal advice.

Laughing at the Nazi Past

Comedy from outside

The earliest famous jokes at Hitler's expense came from abroad: Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1967), with its stage musical number about a Hitler musical (check). Their defenders argued that ridicule robs a dictator of dignity.

Germans join in

German-language comedy came to the subject later and more hesitantly. Films such as Dani Levy's *Mein Führer* (2007), a satire by a Swiss-born Jewish director, were discussed at length for and against (check). The question each time was whether the target was the regime or its victims.

A bestseller

Timur Vermes's novel *Er ist wieder da* ("He's Back", 2012) imagines Hitler waking in present-day Berlin and being taken for a satirist, and a film followed in 2015 (check). Some readers found it a sharp study of how audiences accept a charismatic speaker; others thought it risked making him likeable. Both views have been argued in print.

The usual test

Most discussions turn on one distinction: a joke whose target is the perpetrators, their ideology or the people who went along with it is generally treated as legitimate satire, while a joke that mocks the victims is not. Critics still disagree about borderline cases, and about whether the audience will take the joke as intended. The same debate runs in Britain over comedy about the Second World War, from *'Allo 'Allo!* to *Dad's Army* (check).

The Law: What Is Actually Forbidden

Provision (check each)	What it covers
Incitement to hatred (*Volksverhetzung*, section 130 of the Criminal Code)	Attacks on the dignity of groups, and denying or playing down the Nazi genocide. Context and intent matter, and satire is not automatically exempt (check).
Banned symbols (section 86a)	Displaying symbols of unconstitutional organisations, with exceptions for art, education and similar purposes (check).
Insult (*Beleidigung*, section 185)	Insulting a person is a criminal offence, subject to the freedom of expression in the Basic Law (Article 5) and the exception for art (check).
Insulting a religion (section 166)	Insulting a faith in a way that could disturb public peace; rarely used in practice (check).

Freedom of expression and of art is protected by Article 5 of the Basic Law, and the courts weigh it against personal honour and public order case by case. The result is a legal frame wider than many visitors expect in some respects and narrower in others, especially around the Nazi period.

The Böhmermann Affair, 2016

What happened (check the details)

In March 2016 the satirist Jan Böhmermann (see Chapter 8) read a poem about the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on a ZDF programme. The poem was introduced as a deliberately over-the-top illustration of the difference between permitted satire and forbidden abuse, and the text itself was crude. The Turkish government asked for a prosecution under section 103 of the Criminal Code, which made it an offence to insult a foreign head of state. The German government allowed the investigation to go ahead, while saying it intended to abolish the section. Prosecutors dropped the case in the

autumn of 2016, and section 103 was repealed with effect from 2018 (check all dates). Civil proceedings about the text continued separately (check).

Arguments for the satirist

Supporters said the poem was framed as a lesson, that satire must be free to exaggerate, and that a law protecting foreign rulers from insult sat badly with a free press.

Arguments against

Critics said the content went beyond satire into plain abuse, with elements that drew on ethnic and sexual stereotypes, and that the framing did not change the effect. Some also questioned the political handling by the government.

Why it matters here

The affair is a clear case of the German argument at its most legal: a comedy item became a diplomatic question, and the law itself was changed as a result.

Religion and Blasphemy

- **Cabaret has long mocked the churches**, in the Catholic south and Protestant north alike, and the tradition goes back to the satirists of Chapter 3.
- **Islam is treated differently in practice.** After the Danish cartoons dispute of 2005 to 2006 and the attack on the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, German media and comedians argued over whether jokes about Islam should be handled like jokes about any other religion, or with extra caution because Muslims in Germany are a minority and often face prejudice (check). Both positions have defenders across the political spectrum.
- **The cases are mostly settled outside court**: by editors, broadcasters and audiences, through complaints, cancelled bookings and public argument.

Who May Joke About Whom?

Question	Positions
Group jokes (Chapter 2)	Some say regional and ethnic jokes are harmless banter that shows affection; others say they reinforce prejudice. The East Frisian and Austrian jokes are generally seen as mild, while jokes about immigrant groups are more contested.
Insider and outsider	The comedians from German-Turkish families named in Chapter 8 joke about their own background, which many audiences accept more readily than the same joke from an outsider. Critics say that this rule is too simple, since the content matters more than the speaker.
Punching up or down	A common rule of thumb is that satire should target the powerful and not the weak. Opponents point out that power is hard to measure and that the rule can be used to excuse almost anything.
Context	Audience, venue and framing change how a joke lands: a cabaret in front of regulars, a prime-time programme and a social-media clip differ.

A British comparison

Britain has its own arguments about the limits of comedy: the *Jerry Springer: The Opera* controversy over religion, complaints to Ofcom, the debates around *Little Britain* and the long-running row over how comics should handle gender and race (check). The legal frame differs: Britain has no general insult law of the German kind, but has offences of stirring up hatred and the Communications Act, and Germany's rules about the Nazi period have no British equivalent. In both countries the practical limits are set as much by editors, venues and audiences as by courts.

Check the details

Legal sections, dates and case outcomes are from memory and the law changes. Verify with the text of the Criminal Code (*Strafgesetzbuch*), court reports and news archives. The positions above are summaries of public debates, not a ruling on who is right.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the distinction commonly drawn between satire of Nazism and jokes that mock its victims, and give one work discussed in this chapter that was argued over on those lines.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Summarise the Böhmermann affair in six sentences, giving the arguments of both sides and the legal outcome without judging them.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare the limits of comedy in Germany and in Britain in law, in practice and in the debates, and say what the comparison suggests about the stereotype of the humourless German.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Nazi past:** Chaplin, Lubitsch, Brooks; *Mein Führer*; *Er ist wieder da*
- **The test:** target the perpetrators, not the victims
- **Law:** sections 130, 86a, 185, 166; Article 5 of the Basic Law
- **Böhmermann 2016:** poem, section 103, case dropped, section repealed
- **Open questions:** religion, insider and outsider, punching up or down

German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Testing the Stereotype

The course began with a question and nine chapters of evidence. This last chapter pulls the evidence together: a timeline of the main strands, a table of common claims set against what the course found, and a six-question method for testing any claim about a national sense of humour. It ends by treating comedy as a historical source in its own right. Dates are from the earlier chapters and flagged "check" where they were.

A Timeline of German Humour

Period	Strand (see chapter)
Medieval and early modern	Tricksters such as Till Eulenspiegel, satire and wordplay (Chapters 2 and 3)
1800s to 1914	Satirical magazines, caricature, comic verse; Wilhelm Busch (Chapter 3, check)
1901 to 1933	Cabaret in Berlin and Munich; Karl Valentin's absurdity (Chapters 4 and 5)
1933 to 1989	Humour under the Nazi regime and in the GDR: whispered jokes, censorship and survival (Chapter 6)
1950s to 1980s	Postwar cabaret, Loriot, Heinz Erhardt, Otto and the television age (Chapters 7 and 8)
1990s to now	Stand-up, satire programmes, comedians from migrant families; arguments over limits (Chapters 8 and 9)

Myths and Evidence

Claim	What the course found
"Germans have no sense of humour."	False as stated: there is a long tradition of wordplay, satire, cabaret, absurdity and comedy of manners, and its stars are widely loved at home.
"German humour is all puns and slapstick."	Wordplay is a strength (Chapter 2), but the range includes political satire, absurdism and understatement.

Claim	What the course found
"Germans are too serious to joke about the past."	Partly true of some periods and subjects, but the debates of Chapter 9 show a culture that argues openly about where the line sits.
"Nothing translates."	Puns do not; visual and absurd comedy travels better (Chapter 8, Monty Python).
"Germans laugh at one thing: the Nazis."	False: the Nazi years are one subject among many, and for decades were treated cautiously.
"Germans can't laugh at themselves."	Loriot (Chapter 7) and the cabaret tradition made a trade of it.

A Six-Question Method

1. Who says it?

An insider, a foreign visitor, a comedian, or a travel writer repeating a cliché?

2. What exactly is claimed?

Pin down "humour": jokes told, comedy produced, or willingness to laugh in public? Each is a different test.

3. What would count as evidence?

Audience figures, surviving texts, institutions, contemporary accounts. Decide before looking.

4. What is the comparison?

Compared with whom, and on what measure? A claim about Germans needs a comparison group.

5. Which period and place?

Weimar Berlin, 1970s Munich and 2020s stand-up differ; "Germans" is not one place or time.

6. What would change my mind?

State in advance what finding would count against the claim.

Worked example: "Germans have no sense of humour"

1. The claim is usually made by outsiders, often as a joke. **2.** "Humour" is probably meant as a taste for jokes and comedy in everyday life. **3.** Evidence: comedy institutions,

audiences, surviving traditions, popularity of comedians. **4.** The implied comparison is with the British or Americans, rarely stated. **5.** Different periods give different answers, and the Nazi and GDR years are special cases. **6.** A finding of no comic tradition and no audience would count against it; the course found the opposite. **Verdict:** the claim fails in its strong form. A weaker claim, that German humour differs in its forms (wordplay, formality as a target, caution about the Nazi past) from British humour, is supportable but needs careful wording.

Comedy as a Historical Source

- **It records what people feared.** Whispered jokes under dictatorship (Chapter 6) show what could not be said openly.
- **It records manners.** Loriot (Chapter 7) is a record of postwar middle-class formality, seen from inside.
- **It records argument.** The Böhmermann affair (Chapter 9) changed a law.
- **It has limits.** Jokes survive unevenly, are often about exceptions, and reach us through editors and censors. Use comedy with other sources, not instead of them.

A British comparison

The same method works on stereotypes about the British: "the British have a dry sense of humour" would need the same questions (who says it, compared with whom, in which period). Scotland adds its own claim, that Scottish humour differs from English, which could be tested the same way. Testing a flattering stereotype is as useful as testing an unflattering one.

Check the details

The timeline and table summarise the earlier chapters, and their "check" items still apply. Treat the verdicts as conclusions from the sources used in this course, not as proof.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one entry from the myths-and-evidence table and apply the six-question method to it in a short paragraph.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Pick one piece of comedy from the course and explain what it tells a historian, and what it cannot tell them.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the method to a stereotype about British or Scottish humour, and say what evidence you would collect.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Six questions:** who, what exactly, what evidence, compared with whom, which period and place, what would change my mind
- **Verdict on the stereotype:** fails in its strong form; a weaker claim about forms is supportable
- **Comedy as source:** records fears, manners and arguments; use with other sources

Course complete

You have finished *German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?*: the stereotype and its sources, wordplay and wit, the tricksters and satirists, cabaret, Karl Valentin, laughter under dictatorship, Loriot, television comedy, the limits of the joke, and

a method for testing the stereotype. Related courses include *German Film & Television*, *German Literature*, *German Music*, *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot*, *German Cars & the Autobahn* and *The German Festival Year*.