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German Liberalism in the 19th Century

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Liberalism is an attempt to both understand and change the world, an ideology and a movement, a set of ideas and a set of institutions. Liberal ideas began in Western Europe, but eventually spread throughout the world. This book examines liberal ideas and institutions in Germany from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century provides a comprehensive picture of the movement on both the national and local levels. The book's central thesis is that the distinctive features of German liberalism must be understood in terms of the development of the German state and society.

Sheehan argues that in the middle decades of the nineteenth century liberalism had the advantage of being the first political movement in Germany. It was able to mobilize and direct a broad variety of groups that wanted to change the status quo. After the formation of a united German nation state, however, liberals faced an increasingly dynamic and diverse set of opponents, who were better able to take advantage of the democratic suffrage introduced by Bismarck in 1867. Although liberals remained important in some states and many municipal governments, by 1914 they were pushed to the fringes of national politics. Sheehan concludes his account of liberalism's rise and fall with some reflections on the movement's place in German history and its significance for the disastrous collapse of democratic institutions in 1933.

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