Federalism is a thorny political issue. On the European level, it refers to what is perhaps the most important legacy of late twentieth-century politics: the gradual dissolution of national sovereignty. Instead, political and economic decision-making increasingly takes place on a supranational level – in pan-European political institutions and courtrooms – as well as on a sub-national level – in the regions. This process has polarized public opinion in Europe. From the time of Adenauer to Schröder, Germany has played a key role in promoting progress towards a federal Europe. Britain, despite recent moves towards devolution for Ireland, Scotland and Wales, remains sceptical about the erosion of national sovereignty, and of Germany’s role in promoting it.

The theoretical literature on European federalism is extensive. Yet it has done little to bridge political divides. The language of academic political science is often arcane and abstract. Even when political scientists have tried to address a wider public, however, their influence has remained limited. European federalism is more than an administrative and ‘technical’ problem that can be solved by experts – it is eminently political. Historical experience, national memory and ideology shape its meaning, and the word federalism means different things in different cultures. In Britain, federalism is often taken as a synonym for the threat of a bureaucratic European super-state. In Germany, the same term is used to describe an ideal of diversity within unity, emphasizing the element of devolution. It seems that the search for political compromises is futile if this difference of perception is not addressed. An ‘objective’, scientific definition of federalism cannot solve the problem. On the contrary, if a theoretical definition is superimposed upon people’s political instincts, ‘federalism’, promoted to unite Europeans, will continue to divide them.
How did German ‘federalism’ come to acquire such different connotations from those of the English term? To answer this question, scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines collaborated in a seminar series and conference that took place in 2000 at the University of Manchester. This book presents their findings. The approach we adopt is historical. German *Föderalismus* is not, and never has been, an abstract concept. It has no single founding document and no universal definition. Its meaning evolved gradually, over many centuries. And while this process of evolution is by no means complete, history itself plays a central role in defining federalism in German minds. Indeed, federalism has become, for many, the central embodiment of the country’s history, or at least of its positive (that is, anti-totalitarian) aspects. In the individual chapters of this volume, experts on the various epochs of modern German history examine the changing meaning and reality of German federalism over many centuries. Their contributions are arranged in chronological order, but they do not ‘narrate’ German history. Rather, we have used different approaches – cultural, political, linguistic, constitutional – to examine the concept of German federalism at distinct phases of its evolution.

The investigation begins in the eighteenth century. It was then that federalism was first used in the modern, political sense. America led the way. The War of Independence provided the historical backdrop for the publication of the famous ‘Federalist Papers’ of 1788. America became a federal experiment that excited Europeans as well: for the first time, it seemed, the federal theories of Montesquieu, Rousseau and other leading lights of the Enlightenment were translated into political reality. In the process, the term federalism assumed much more specific connotations. It was no longer one branch of political theory: it became a political movement which faced one important political opposition – and one only. A unitary state was not an option for the diverse set of former colonies. What American politicians disagreed about was merely the degree of independence that individual states should retain. The label ‘Federalist’ was assumed by those who advocated a relatively high degree of political coherence. The state they envisaged was far removed from the centralizing ambitions of European absolutism. Indeed, Montesquieu’s and Rousseau’s federalism which had inspired the American Federalists was conceived as a liberal alternative to absolutist centralization. But the American opponents of the Federalists were not defenders of absolutism: conversely, they were those who advocated an even smaller degree of centralization, at best a loose confederation of states, with no supremacy of federal law, and