

The Curious History of the German 'Doubled S' - ß

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In my previous posting [Are those even the same letters in old German?](#), I talked about the German umlaut letters. This time it is about the very confusing letter s in German- it was confusing in earlier English writing, and German still uses part of that old style.



Ä, Ö and Ü are variants of familiar letters, but the fourth letter that German has that we don't is the real kicker: **ß**. It looks like an odd form of b, but it's pronounced s, like in *Straße* (sometimes spelled Strasse, "SHTRAA-suh" 'street' or *Schloß* "SHLAWS" 'castle, palace').

A give-away is the name for that letter: Eszett ("ESS-tset") which means "s z". Eszett is just an s plus a z... but an old-style s and z. You know the old-time way of writing an s in the 1700's? It's called the long s, and looks almost the same as an f, only the cross-piece is only on the left side, it doesn't extend to the right side the way an f's does.

In English 'a congressional session' used to be written:

' a congressional session'

In a word like 'confession' you can see the f and long s side by side. The f has a bar all the way through, whereas the f has a bar just on the left side. Not a great design, but most of Europe used it for centuries.

'I have a confession to make'

f ~ J

So getting back to the ess-tzett: f plus the older way to spell z, **3**, gives you f+**3** = **f3** = **ß**. German has run the old form of s into the old form of z. It's always pronounced like s, and can be replaced with double-s, so Preußen ('Prussia') can also be spelled Preussen. In Switzerland, they only use the double-s. Nowhere do the German-speaking countries use the long-s anymore (except to look archaic), but the long-s is the norm in older writing.

Earlier English had something similar, when a word ended in -ss:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Long-s-US-Bill-of-Rights.jpg>

(Here's an article on the 'long s' that looks to us like an f: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_s)

So that is what is going on with those odd s/f letters, and what is going on when you see the ess-tzett **ß**. The rest of the different forms of the Latin Alphabet that you'll find in older German developed that sort of way as well- habits of handwriting gradually let them drift to those forms, each one with its own story.



Do you have any German, Danish, Dutch, Swedish or Norwegian documents you can't read? We can help. Find out more [here](#).

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