

Charles Krauthammer on International Fears of Unification (March 26, 1990)

Abstract

The conservative American columnist Charles Krauthammer discusses the international anxiety about the restoration of a united Germany, especially in Poland and Israel. He downplays the military and economic criticisms, but emphasizes that a revival of nationalism would have disruptive consequences for European integration.

Source

The German Revival

Overnight and once again Germany has become a great power. Not for long will it continue to be intervened against. All that is left to negotiate at the coming “two plus four” talks on reunification is the mode of liquidating the Big Four’s half-century intervention in Germany. Beyond those negotiations lies the other half of the great power equation: In what ways and to what extent will Germany once again become an intervening power?

[...]

Anxiety about Germany is so pervasive and seems so self-explanatory that it often escapes analysis. What exactly is the nature of the German danger? The answer presents itself in three distinct parts: military, economic, and political. The first two have been widely advertised and widely exaggerated. The third, the subtle effect German reunification will have in the realm of geopolitical ideas and institutions, is apt to prove the most serious.

I. MILITARY

At the most concrete level, the fear of Germany has to do with borders. Much territory was stripped from Germany to punish it for starting World War II, and to diminish it as a hedge against World War III. With a reunified Germany dominating the continent, with Russia and America having gone home, who will stop Germany when it invokes a statute of limitations on World War II and demands restoration to its former, pre-Hitler self?

[...]

Europeans, with memories of the Wehrmacht crisscrossing the continent, fear for their borders. If that fear is paranoia, then we must count Lech Walesa, Mikhail Gorbachev, most people in between, and much of Western Europe, too, as paranoid. Political philosopher Johnny Carson put it best. “The Berlin Wall is down,” he noted the day after the event. “That means that all Germans are now free to go wherever they want in Europe. Hey, wasn’t that the problem back in 1939?”

When the “two plus four” process is over and ratified by the thirty-five Helsinki countries^[1] at the end of this year, Germany will no doubt be required as the price for reunification to pledge adherence in perpetuity to its current borders. Yet no one can be absolutely sure that Germany ten or twenty years from now will not dismiss this agreement as the relic of a weakness long passed, as it did the Versailles agreements in the 1930s.

At the root of this fear of German revanchism lies the German national character, or more precisely, the belief in a German national character. The fear is that left to themselves Germans will revert to Teutonic barbarism, that German romanticism – the peculiarly fevered romanticism of the worker bee – will again seek fateful expression in politics and history. Beside this fear, forty years of democracy, forty years of peaceful accommodation to neighbors – in short, forty years of history – count for little.

One cannot definitively disprove this fear. How does one prove the negative proposition that Germans do not suffer from some peculiar character defect that inclines them toward expansion and aggression? One can only say that invoking national character as an explanatory principle or predictive device should always be cause for skepticism. The psychological interpretation of nations is even more unreliable than the psychological interpretation of individuals, itself a notoriously unreliable enterprise. By this reckoning, how do we account for the fact that the French disposition toward romantic expansionism, which took them all the way to Moscow in 1812, was abruptly banished in 1815?

We account for it as the triumph of history over “character.” As Daniel Pipes says, there is no cure for total ambition quite like total defeat. Before there was a German problem, there was the French problem. Waterloo was its solution. Who worries about French national character now? There is no certainty, of course, that the German problem was solved in 1945 as surely as the French problem was solved in 1815. But the last forty years of German history cannot be so easily dismissed. (And security guarantees, such as a continued American presence on the continent, should provide sufficient reassurance until the new Germany has the time to demonstrate that it is indeed heir to the Federal Republic and not to more archaic German forms.)

II. ECONOMIC

The more realistic fear of the new Germany is economic and, as a result, cultural. As Rita Klimová, the new Czech ambassador to the United States, said recently, “The German-speaking world” – by which she meant the two Germanys and Austria – “will now achieve what the Hapsburgs, Bismarck, and Hitler failed to achieve: the Germanization of Central Europe.” She added, “Through peaceful and laudable means, of course. And by the logic of commerce rather than conquest.” Her point was clear. The dynamism of German commerce is already being felt in the weak economies of Eastern Europe. Czech schools, she explained, had just abolished Russian as the second language. The only question now was whether the new second language would be English or German. She urged the United States to send English teachers.

Eastern Europe fears outright domination by the German dynamo. Western Europe – Britain and France in particular – fear eclipse. This will be an economy of 80 million people producing fully forty percent of the European Community’s gross domestic product. As the economic powerhouse of the continent, it will dictate policy to its neighbors even more powerfully than it does today.

One can understand the origin of these fears without granting them undue respect. The fear of being outcompeted by a peaceful commercial republic operating on fairly equal terms is a fear of which a nation ought not be proud. It characterizes, for example, the rather hysterical and occasionally racist American hostility toward Japan. German economic domination of the continent may be an injury to the pride of the British and the French. And the spread of German automobile manuals may be unwelcome to Czechs and Poles. But neither development constitutes a menace to anyone’s standard of living (in market systems, prosperity is not a zero-sum game), or a threat to anyone’s national existence, or an argument against German reunification.

III. POLITICAL

What then is the real problem with German reunification? It will reverse one of the most salutary European developments of the last fifty years: the decline of sovereignty. German reunification will

constitute the most dramatic rebirth of sovereignty in the postwar era. In this era, Europe has enjoyed a historically unprecedented period of peace largely because the sovereignty of its warring nations was suppressed, brutally in the East and benignly in the West, by the advent of two great empires. Whatever else it did, the cold war division of Europe into a pax Sovietica and pax Americana did have the virtue of suppressing internecine European conflict.

But the imperial suppression of sovereignty must be temporary. Empire is not forever. Hence the post-cold war question: How to remove the artificial suppression of sovereignty by the superpowers, without then risking the national explosions that follow almost universally – in our time, in Asia and Africa – whenever the imperial power withdraws? Western Europe thought it had found the answer. Over the last forty years it has gradually built up transnational institutions, most notably the European Community. The great project accelerating toward completion was the formation of the single European market by 1992 that would transform the economies of the Twelve into an economic unit almost as free of legal barriers as that of the United States. Ireland and Greece would trade as freely as Maine and Texas.

But the importance of Europe '92 is not just economic. It involves one of history's greatest peacetime transfers of sovereignty. By giving up enormous economic, social, and regulatory power to a central European authority, the countries of Western Europe are consciously giving up much of their political autonomy. That is precisely why Margaret Thatcher so resists the process. She knows that EC monetary union, for example, may soon lead to a common currency, which will lead further to a common economic policy, which will lead inexorably toward political confederation. Talk of a United States of Europe is premature. But it is not farfetched. That is the trajectory that Western Europe is following.

Or was until November 9, the day the Berlin Wall fell. Europe '92 was to substitute the diminished sovereignty imposed by European integration for the diminished sovereignty once imposed by American domination. It was to be a transition from imperially- to self-imposed community. The great hope was that an integrated Europe would begin to acquire some of the internal stability of a federal country such as the United States. By diminishing the sovereignty of each country and centralizing more and more authority in "Europe," the national rivalries that led to centuries of European wars would become obsolete. It would be as if Texas went to war with Maine.

German reunification challenges the idea and derails the process. West Germany, pledged to diminish its sovereignty by joining this single European market, is now about to swallow the East, an incorporation that will augment its population, territory, economy, military strength, political centrality, and diplomatic clout. It is about to become the new giant on the continent. Leave aside potential territorial claims against its neighbors. Leave aside the possibility of Germany acquiring nuclear weapons. The simple fact of the explosive birth of a new and huge Germany in the center of the continent immediately undercuts the entire movement toward European confederation.

Such a Germany is its own confederation. Absent any malice, ill will, or "romanticism" on the part of its leadership, it will necessarily begin to act in accord with its new power – independently and with the kind of assertiveness and regard for distant interests that characterizes the other great powers, notably the United States and the Soviet Union.

The real danger posed by a reunified Germany is not that a new Bismarck or Hitler will arise. It is that the birth of a new giant in the middle of the continent will arrest Europe's great confederal project and produce in its place, as *The Economist* put it, a "revised version of a previously destructive balance-of-power system," a recapitulation of the kind of international system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that ended in catastrophe.

We can see the new balance-of-power system taking shape already. The shape is disturbingly familiar. The Western European powers are maneuvering to reestablish pre-war links with the ex-Soviet colonies

of Eastern Europe, not just in pursuit of economic opportunity, but quite consciously to prevent Germany from dominating the region. Take the Polish question. Britain and France have forcefully supported Poland's demand for German acceptance of the current Polish frontier. Chancellor Helmut Kohl demurs and rejects out of hand Poland's demand for a presence at the coming "two plus four" deliberations. The Poles then seek Soviet assistance on the issue. They now wave the Soviet card – keeping Soviet troops in Poland, on Germany's border – as a warning to Germany to be more accommodating. This pattern is not new.

As the Europeans begin to maneuver to find partners to balance and contain Germany, each country is forced into a kind of reactive nationalism. Margaret Thatcher "is practicing a very narrow brand of nineteenth-century nationalism," complained a West German diplomat to *The Washington Post*. "The danger is that when one country does this, others may be forced to follow." She might reply, We didn't start this. But no matter. Wherever one chooses to place the blame, the result is the same: the movement toward integration, federalization, and dilution of sovereignty is halted. Europe invented the idea of sovereignty, suffered its consequences, and was about to demonstrate how to transcend it. Now Europe is heading back the other way. For a continent consisting of twenty-nine sovereignties speaking forty-five languages, that way is not just an anachronism, it is a prescription for instability.

[...]

Last October, when writing about a post-cold war world, I ventured that among the great powers of the new multipolar order would be "Europe." It was possible then to imagine a confederated Europe emerging from the structure of the EC. It is harder to imagine that now. Not because Germany is by policy its enemy, but because the rebirth of a great German nation within Europe is provoking a rebirth of national self-assertion throughout Europe. In this climate, it is impossible to think of a "Europe" emerging. As we head toward multipolarity, the pole that was to be "Europe" will instead be greater Germany. It is possible that Germany might still choose to subsume itself in Europe, but in the first flush of post-(cold)-war independence, that is hardly likely.

The Berlin Wall came down too soon. Had East Germany been the last Soviet province to fall, as we thought the Kremlin would insist, it might have been but a small piece digestible by a new and stable Europe. Having come so quickly, German unification threatens to disrupt the whole by creating in the heart of Europe a greater Germany that Europe cannot contain.

The danger is not that greater Germany will march across Europe but that its birth turns the twilight of sovereignty into a new dawn. It derails a process by which Europe was hoping to make itself safe from itself. We return instead to the old Europe, balance of power Europe, the Europe that produces more history than it can consume.

NOTES

[1] The "Helsinki countries" are those states that signed the Helsinki Final Act on August 1, 1975. The talks in Helsinki were part of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was attended by almost all the European states as well as the U.S. and Canada. The Final Act discussed, among other issues, cooperation in humanitarian, economic, and scientific areas." – ed.

Source: Charles Krauthammer, "The German Revival," *New Republic*, March 26, 1990.

Recommended Citation: Charles Krauthammer on International Fears of Unification (March 26, 1990), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3002>> [May 18, 2024].