

Charles Powell on the Chequers Meeting (March 24, 1990)

Abstract

To discuss the implications of unification, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher invited a group of well-known authorities on Germany like Gordon Craig and Timothy Garton Ash to her residence, revealing historical fears of the resurgence of a united Germany.

Source

Introduction

The Prime Minister said that Europe had come to the end of the postwar period. Important decisions and choices about its future lay ahead. . . . We needed to reach an assessment of what a united Germany would be like. History was a guide, but one could not just extrapolate. We also had to devise a framework for Europe's future, taking account of German unification and the sweeping changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was important to get the balance right between the lessons of the past and the opportunities of the future. She would welcome the wisdom and advice of those present.

Who are the Germans?

We started by talking about the Germans themselves and their characteristics. Like other nations, they had certain characteristics, which you could identify from the past and expect to find in the future. It was easier – and more pertinent to the present discussion – to think of the less happy ones: their insensitivity to the feelings of others (most noticeable in their behavior over the Polish border), their obsession with themselves, a strong inclination to self-pity, and a longing to be liked. Some even less flattering attributes were also mentioned as an abiding part of the German character: in alphabetical order, *Angst*, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, sentimentality. Two further aspects of the German character were cited as reasons for concern about the future. First, a capacity for excess, to overdo things, to kick over the traces. Second, a tendency to over-estimate their own strength and capabilities. . . .

Have the Germans Changed?

It was as well to be aware of all these characteristics. But there was a strong school of thought among those present that today's Germans were very different from their predecessors. It was argued that our basic perception of Germans related to a period of German history running from Bismarck until 1945. This was the phase of imperial Germany, characterized by neurotic self-assertiveness, high birth-rate, a closed economy, a chauvinist culture. . . . But 1945 was quite different and marked a sea-change. There was no longer a sense of historic mission, no ambitions for physical conquest, no more militarism. Education and the writing of history had changed. There was an innocence of and about the past on the part of the new generation of Germans. We should have no real worries about them.

This view was not accepted by everyone. It still had to be asked how a cultured and cultivated nation had allowed itself to be brain-washed into barbarism. If it had happened once, could it not happen again? Apprehension about Germany did not relate just to the Nazi period but to the whole post-Bismarckian era, and inevitably caused deep distrust. The way in which the Germans currently used their elbows and threw their weight about in the European Community suggested that a lot had still not changed. While we all admired and indeed envied what the Germans had achieved in the last 45 years, the fact was that

their institutions had not yet been seriously tested by adversity such as a major calamity. We could not tell how Germans would react in such circumstances. In sum, no one had serious misgivings about the present leaders or political elite of Germany. But what about 10, 15 or 20 years from now? Could some of the unhappy characteristics of the past re-emerge with just as destructive consequences?

What will be the Consequences of Reunification?

We looked more closely at two particular aspects of the future: the consequences of unification and Germany's role in Eastern Europe.

Even those most disposed to look at the bright side admitted to some qualms about what unification would mean for German behavior in Europe. We could not expect a united Germany to think and act in exactly the same way as the Federal Republic which we had known for the last 45 years – and this would be true even though a united Germany would almost certainly inherit the FRG's institutions. The Germans would not necessarily think more dangerously, but they would think differently. There was already evident a kind of triumphalism in German thinking and attitudes which would be uncomfortable for the rest of us. Reference was also made to Günter Grass's comment: in the end reunification will get everyone against us, and we all know what happens when people are against us.

Then, too, there were reasons to worry about the effects on the character of a united Germany of bringing in 17 million predominantly Protestant north Germans brought up under a mendacious orthodoxy. How would this alter the basically Catholic Rhineland basis of the post-war FRG, with its political and economic center of gravity increasingly in the south and west? We could not assume that a united Germany would fit quite so comfortably into Western Europe as the FRG. There would be a growing inclination to resurrect the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, with Germany's role being that of broker between East and West. It was noticeable that Chancellor Kohl now spoke of German's partners in East and West.

That tendency could be strengthened by the effect of unification on Germany's party system. The vote for the conservative alliance in East Germany could be seen as a vote for quick unification rather than for the values and policies of the West German CDU. There was a strong pacifist, neutralist, anti-nuclear constituency in East Germany, which could have a considerable effect on the views of a united Germany. That effect could be to make a united Germany both less “Western” and less politically stable than the FRG. At worst, the extremes at both ends of the political spectrum could grow in influence, leading to a return to Weimar politics (although no one argued this with any great conviction)....

Conclusions

Where did this leave us? No formal conclusions were drawn. The weight of the evidence and the argument favoured those who were optimistic about life with a united Germany. We were reminded that in 1945 our aim had been a united Germany shorn of its eastern provinces but under democratic and non-Communist government, with the states of Eastern Europe free to choose their own governments. We had failed to get that in 1945, but had won it now. Far from being agitated, we ought to be pleased. We were also reminded that Anglo-German antagonisms since the fall of Bismarck had been injurious to Europe as a whole and must not be allowed to revive once more. When it came to failings and unhelpful characteristics, the Germans had their share and perhaps more, but in contrast to the past, they were much readier to recognize and admit this themselves.

The overall message was unmistakable: we should be nice to the Germans. But even the optimists had some unease, not for the present and the immediate future, but for what might lie further down the road than we can yet see.

Source: H. James and M. Stone, eds., *When the Wall Came Down: Reactions to German Unification*. New York, 1992, p. 233ff.

Recommended Citation: Charles Powell on the Chequers Meeting (March 24, 1990), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5275>> [May 02, 2024].