

Germany and the Ghosts of Its Past (November 6, 2009)

Abstract

Former U.S. Ambassador to Germany, John Kornblum, analyzes Germany's role as a "normal" international power in the 21st century. Its geographic location in the middle of Europe coupled with the legacies of its past are key to understanding its future role, he argues. He criticizes Germany's actions during the Euro zone crisis but also asserts that its place in the global community will evolve with time.

Source

From the Middle to the Center

[T]he Germans are the most impenetrable, hardest to define, most contradictory, least transparent, most incalculable, most surprising and self-intimidating of any people. They escape easy definition. —Friedrich Nietzsche

Has Germany become more normal over the past two decades? More normal than what? Today's Federal Republic behaves quite logically for the situation in which Germany finds itself, but its self-image is still defined by mental maps that are shrouded by the past. Generational change and the dramatic new circumstances of a globally integrated world are likely to change these maps dramatically over the next decade. As they do, Germany's definition of what is normal is likely steadily to evolve. First indications are that Germany will deal well with the new normality of the 21st century, but that is not yet the question before us. Put slightly differently, that question is, why do we all work so hard at trying to make Germany "normal" in the first place?

We do it—Germans do it, Americans, Brits, French, Dutch, Poles, Jews and others do it, too—because, despite the freedom and prosperity of today's Federal Republic, Germany's contradictions remain the "Exportmeister's" most successful product. Germany's primary effect on world history has not been through its philosophy, its art, or even its technology, impressive as these have been, but rather as a result of the often disastrous results of its mysteries. Germany remains so central to the Western world that any effort to peer into the future must by definition include discussion of where Germany's next vision of "normalcy" will land us.

If German society were planted somewhere in the South Pacific, its serial neuroses wouldn't bother us much, if at all. But then again, if Germany weren't in the middle of Europe, it wouldn't be Germany. You don't get one without the other, which is to say that Germany has usually been too big or too small, too malleable or too aggressive, and most often too self-absorbed to be an easy partner in the complex world of Europe. Its historic "normalcy" is born of its *Mittellage* in Europe, reinforced since 1945 by the deep trauma of the Third Reich and the division following World War II.

As a result of its *Mittellage*, Germans often feel somehow unfinished and even tainted. They have developed a frustrating tendency to view themselves as both guilty and victimized, often at the same time. To an outsider, the twists and turns of such a mentality are at times unnerving. Germans' inscrutability also invites diplomatic maladroitness. George H.W. Bush fell into the normalcy trap with his offer of "partnership in leadership" to a newly reunified Germany in 1990. His well-meaning, even flattering proposal caused confusion and consternation within Germany because many Germans then believed that reunification would allow Germany to submerge its past within an integrated Europe. The rebirth of a special German leadership role was the last thing most Germans wanted. The American

President's suggestion thus led many Germans, and not only Germans, to suspect that Washington might be seeking to use Germany to undermine the nascent European Union.

In any case, Europeans, including the Germans, are doing just fine in weakening the European Union on their own. Since 2001, Germany's mantra of pro-European rhetoric has been accompanied by an increasing egotism whenever its national interests are concerned. In the aftermath of 9/11 and during the financial meltdown in 2008, both global crises that cried out for enlightened German leadership within allied counsels, Germany instead followed its own instincts with little apparent concern for European, let alone Atlantic, unity. The Berlin Republic hastily concluded a bilateral deal with Russia for a gas pipeline under the Baltic, despite the concerns of EU members such as Poland, Finland and Estonia, each of which had suffered bitterly from German-Russian deals in the past.

[...]

So, is this the end of the story? Is a "normal" Germany twenty years after the fall of the wall a self-obsessed nation that drags Europe into irrelevance? Anything is possible, but that worst-case scenario does not seem likely. The reason is that Germany's current confusion is caused as much by the disappearance of old Cold War certainties as by the siren song of a new nationalism. The global context is changing faster than Germany, or any European state, can digest. Basic measures of political and strategic interests are shifting. The soft whirl of integrated networks will be vastly more important than solemn incantations of eternal partnership with Russia or the repeated beseeching calls for European unity.

Think of it this way: Twenty years after the end of World War II, the world was still mired in the depths of East-West confrontation, with many dramatic and discouraging chapters ahead. But the foundations for the eventual end of the Cold War had already been laid with NATO, the EEC and the subversive temptations of *détente*, of which, for those who recall it, *Ostpolitik* was a mere descant in a minor key. Similarly, the past twenty years have been consumed by the need to deal with business left over from the Cold War era. We are just beginning to understand the new dynamic of a multipolar world. But, just as in the 1960s, the foundations for a much different future have already been laid. We just need a bit of patience and confidence, and we will soon see what that future looks like. It will not be "normal", because, by definition, normal means something we recognize. Germany's uncertain *Mittellage* in Europe will gradually give way to a more confident role in the center of a new kind of global community.

How so? Rising in the place of the two Cold War-era blocs are globally integrated spaces centered on interlocking regional networks. China and India are new internodal points of such networks. The most important of these networks, however, is composed of a much larger group of countries that extends from its easternmost point on the Finnish border with Russia westward to the American border with Russia at the Bering Straits. This new Atlantic-to-Pacific Euro-American community is home to nearly a billion people who produce nearly half of the world's GDP. It is a zone of democracy, prosperity and stability like no other on the planet. While politicians still tinker with the old Cold War definition of Europe, the next chapter of Atlantic history is already being composed within a tightly woven web of interlocking commercial and cultural networks.

Today's German normalcy is still based on the old maps—now mental more than literal—of a Europe divided into both nations and blocs of nations, with Germany resting uneasily in the middle. Tomorrow's normalcy will instead be based on different lines of consanguinity, and probably on new sorts of political communities—not narrowly national, but not amorphously global either—that we can only guess about today. These new spaces will transcend old dividing lines in Europe and elsewhere, turning strategic interests outward rather than inward toward the maintenance of local balances. Even Russia and the former Soviet republics will sooner or later shift focus from outmoded, parochial fixations with local balances and define their strategic interests in the context of these new global links. Germany, you will

note, is more or less midway between Asia on the one side and North America on the other end of this expanded geo-strategic geography.

Germany is especially well prepared to take advantage of this new dynamic. It possesses one of the most highly developed industrial, transportation and communications networks in the world. It will be located no longer in the middle of inward-looking polities but at the center of outward-looking ones. It will be the pivot of new global networks connecting Asia, Europe and the Americas. It sits astride trade routes that link North America with Europe and Asia. Anyone who travels on the German Autobahn can grasp the evolving situation immediately: Truck traffic from everywhere already clogs the roadways, and not surprisingly, most of the world's leading logistical companies are German. The German Railways are planning multiple rail lines to China. Helsinki is already the most important seaport for Central Asia.

During its first 75 years as a state, Germany in the middle had to juggle an unsteady balance of strategic interests to its east and west. For most of the past hundred years, American engagement in Europe was focused primarily on balancing Germany's role within this unpredictable continental balance. Now, near the end of its second 75 years as a state, Germany has a chance to build on its historic role as a network node, as a crossroads of trade and industry integrating global economic and commercial networks across Europe and Asia, North and South America. With that will come new tasks, new responsibilities and above all a much-changed mentality. With its deepening sense of being at the center of a newly integrated world will come a growing sense of responsibility that will cause the ghosts of the past to gradually recede. Germany will not answer lingering questions about its normalcy; it will transcend them. By our lights today, Germany will not be normal, but nothing else will be either.

Source: John C. Kornblum, "From the Middle to the Center," *The American Interest*, November 2, 2009.

Recommended Citation: Germany and the Ghosts of Its Past (November 6, 2009), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5323>> [May 14, 2024].