

A Liberal Intellectual Reflects on the Burden of “Being German” (1983)

Abstract

In a column in the liberal weekly *Die Zeit*, one of its editors reflects on the lack of national pride among intellectuals, describes their weak ties to the Federal Republic, and argues for the recognition of German culture and language and for an understanding of the Federal Republic as a region within a larger European framework—thereby renouncing a specifically national consciousness.

Source

On the Burden of Being German

“A German I shall never be”—this sentence appears in John le Carré’s new international bestseller *The Little Drummer Girl* (see p. 27). The “spy novel” genre does not rank very high in our literary hierarchy in this country. Yet an author of the international standing of David Cornwell (alias John le Carré) should not be skimmed through, but rather read sentence by sentence. The German reader might be taken aback upon reading that Alexis, the German, decides, “In my next life I shall be a Jew or a Spaniard or an Eskimo or just a fully committed anarchist like everybody else. But a German I shall never be—you do it once as a penance and that’s it.”

This sentence must be both fascinating and disturbing to a German. Not so much because it is being circulated in millions of copies, but more because the author, who spent a long time living among Germans and has some German friends, cannot be accused of having an “anti-German” attitude. And mostly because David Cornwell came up with a catchy formula to express the prevailing opinion of us Germans throughout the world—and what some of us ourselves sometimes think. We shouldn’t deceive ourselves just because our French friends or American colleagues are polite, if not downright friendly, and willing to grant one or another of us special status. The fact that many of us consider it a compliment when we are told “you don’t seem at all like a German,” says more than we would like to admit.

We Germans spend too much time thinking about ourselves and wanting to be loved. Since people say that about us anyway, why shouldn’t I wallow a bit in this national vice? Actually, who—except for J.R. Ewing^[1]—has not wanted to be loved? And we have good reason to think about ourselves.

Like Dr. Alexis, so many of us are drawn to Spain, from the Condor Legion to the villa owners on the Costa Brava, that there seems to be some kind of affinity—even if, in the end, it turns out to be a longing for sun and affordable prices. Whether just as many Germans would like to be Jews as Jews liked being Germans before the horror, is subject to doubt and evades a more extended discussion in any case. The Eskimos are a literary gag of John le Carré: “Negroes” would have been better, if only in memory of Kurt Tucholsky, who could imagine an Eskimo who sings Italian arias, but not a Negro who speaks with a Saxon dialect.^[2]

Proud Patriotism

And what about the Germans who would rather be British or French or—if only the British and French would go along with it—“European”?

One fact that is always worth thinking about again is that among Germans there is no such thing as a

German consciousness that is both binding and unifying. Who among us ever wanted to be a German “as a penance,” while being totally surrounded by the unrepentant?

Historically speaking, until 1871 there were Bavarians and Badenians, Saxons and Prussians (and many more). A national consciousness that was just developing and then, in a typical German fashion, quickly got out of hand, was brought from exuberance in 1914 back down to nothingness in 1918. Because of Versailles, the Weimar democracy was second-rate and nothing to be proud of. Contemporary historians should pay greater attention to the extent to which Hitler and his helpers profited from allowing themselves to be carried by a new German pride that wanted to emerge. For some Germans, National Socialism meant the end of their ability to identify with present-day Germany; for most, it was the catastrophe of the war and the dictates of the “Victorious Powers” that led to the utter extinction of the feeling, “I am a German.” There is no such thing as sniveling patriotism, there is only proud patriotism. And that, in fact, is more foreign here than in any other European country.

Psychologically speaking, we have no national identity with which someone who was a child in 1945—or not born yet—could identify. All in all, this Federal Republic is not a bad state, perhaps it is really the best that ever existed on German soil. But who wants to feel like a “Federal Republican”? It was actually easier back in the late 1940s to stand up defiantly against the occupying forces as a “Native of Trizonesia”^[3]

The whole matter of German national consciousness would probably have been much easier if the demarcation line between East and West had not also divided what remained of Germany into two halves. To be sure, even a “German Democratic Federal Republic GDFR” would have had a hard time dealing with Hitler’s legacy, the lost Eastern territories, and the mistrust of the superpowers. And also with what the world considers the “German national character.” A genuinely lighthearted national pride would not have arisen there either.

But what does it mean to say, if only the division of Europe had not also divided what remained of Germany?^[4] It did, and there’s no sense in crying over spilled milk. The findings of a survey commissioned during the SPD-FDP coalition by the Ministry for Intra-German Relations and conducted by the Infratest public opinion research institute were recently published in Bonn. The most telling result: whereas about 20 percent of the total West German population is either indifferent to or rejects reunification, the figure is about twice that for young people between fourteen and twenty-one. This means that including Leipzig or Dresden in images of “Germany” will not really seem natural to the adult Germans of tomorrow.

Young Germans feel like members of a generation—that’s the most obvious [point of identification], the most clear-cut, and the most fleeting. For what about the forty-year-old who once vowed to trust “no one over thirty”? The solidarity of the “young” is deceiving, since youth passes so quickly. The bastion of the German family has crumbled—certainly not as completely nor as drastically as in the picture painted by one-sided sociologists but definitely more drastically than in the Romance countries. If anything, it is region of origin [“Heimat”] that is most likely to continue holding people together. If someone here still wants to feel proud, then he is proud of coming from Lake Constance [in the south] or the *Waterkant* [on the northern coast], from the Black Forest or the Rhineland. He’s proud of being a Bavarian or a native of the Hanseatic cities.

Little in Common

But in this case, something is missing. We can hardly pronounce the word “fatherland.” The thought of “dying for Bonn” would sound ridiculous to most of us—which is also a good thing. We are citizens of the world, cosmopolitans with excellent competence in foreign languages, and no one travels abroad more than we do.

But if we think about what it really means to be a German today—what it means, where the substance of

the statement lies—then the only identifiable common ground we can think of is history, culture, and language. Lots of shaky foundations. We are Hitler’s heirs, like it or not. Mozart the Austrian, Kafka the Czech, and the many other “bearers of culture” for whom we are competing with the GDR—Luther, Schiller, Goethe—are hardly suitable as bearers of a German consciousness specific to the Federal Republic. And the common language leads to rash conclusions of a commonality that East Germans, Austrians, and Swiss, for good reason, will reject.

Curiously, only few Germans consider the question of national identity to be particularly urgent. Most make do—with the family, their circle of friends, the solidarity of the workplace or professional associations, the neighborhood. And everyone has lots of foreign friends. We almost don’t really care if we come back as Eskimos or as Germans, especially since none of us believe we will come back “in a next life” at all.

When people express their wishes, a slight melodrama can hardly be avoided. No matter. To us, being German means being aware of German art and science, cultivating our German language, not losing our family, loving the area we come from . . . yes, even here, “love” is allowed, and striving for that “United States of Europe” into which we can bring more than just the Deutschmark that everyone always wants: for instance, the—not totally voluntary—lack of a national consciousness.

NOTES

[1] The anti-hero of the popular prime-time drama, *Dallas*—eds.

[2] This is a reference to the text “Nationales” (1924) by the German-Jewish satirist Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935)—trans.

[3] This was a carnival song in 1948–49 (words and music: Karl Berbuer, Cologne 1948), referring to the three Western zones in Germany—trans.

[4] The reference to West Germany in the original is likely to be a typo; the repetition of the previous reference to *Rest-Deutschland* makes more sense—eds.

Source: Rudolf Walter Leonhardt, “Von der Last, Deutscher zu sein,” *Die Zeit*, September 2, 1983. Republished with permission.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: A Liberal Intellectual Reflects on the Burden of “Being German” (1983), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1156>> [May 17, 2025].