

Europe as Homeland (Retrospective Account, 2004)

Abstract

During his chancellorship (1982–1998), Helmut Kohl was known as both a champion of European integration and a loyal native son of Rhineland-Palatinate. As he explains below, he never regarded these two sides of his personality as contradictory but rather always saw them as inextricably linked, for German history has always been part of European history.

Source

Homeland Europe

What incredible winds rush past a person over the course of time, especially in a period of transition like the one I have lived through. When I was born on April 3, 1930, a Thursday, in the Ludwigshafen Municipal Hospital, General Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg was the incumbent Reich President and Heinrich Brüning was Reich Chancellor of the Weimar Republic. My homeland, the Palatinate, had been occupied by the French since the end of the First World War. It was not until that summer of 1930 that the occupying forces withdrew from the region west of the Rhine.

The Palatines are a special breed. This has to do with their history. They know how to celebrate and have fun. God provided the Palatinate with an abundance of wine and sun. Like the grapevine that digs itself into the ground, the people there are deeply rooted in their homeland; they are well acquainted with their history and with tales about the Romans, who brought wine to the area, about the Speyer Cathedral, where the German kings and emperors of the Middle Ages were laid to rest in eternal peace, and about the Imperial Diet in Speyer and Worms.

In geographical and especially geopolitical terms, my homeland is a European heartland, as heralded by the Heidelberg Castle and the Trifels Castle overlooking Annweiler, where the Salian crown jewels were kept, the insignia of imperial power. The Speyer Cathedral, the largest church in the Western world when it was built in the eleventh century, is for me a special symbol of the unity of German and European history. During my chancellorship, I led many official guests from all over the world through the cathedral and experienced how it works, in its simplicity and clarity, when the sun shines through the windows and brings to life the warm colors of the Palatinate red sandstone, so that it literally speaks to us.

The Roman-German emperors ruled not over a nation-state but an early House of Europe extending from Sicily to the North Sea. They carried the consciousness of the Western world within them, this culture influenced by antiquity and Christianity. In its heyday, the Palatinate was considered the center of the Holy Roman Empire, but later it became a pawn in the game of power politics. The Thirty Years War and the Palatinate War of Succession left a ravaged and depopulated land in their wake. In the nineteenth century especially, crop failure, material hardship, and the struggle for freedom drove many to emigrate.

Between the historic dates, one must see the faces of the people who lived in these times of bitter distress. We suffered from our border position and from France's advance to the Rhine. Every generation erected new war memorials and military cemeteries. It caused people to develop a special attitude toward life. They are neither averse to the pleasures of life nor inclined to dogmatic thinking. We Palatines have a sense of freedom and a healthy skepticism for ideologues and ideologies. The human being is more important than any ideology. Live and let live is the Palatinate principle of tolerance, and

our openness and our lifestyle are certainly linked to the Mediterranean climate and French influences.

Today, the Hambach Festival of May 1832 is still considered the awakening point of German democracy. At the time, roughly 30,000 people, including Poles and Frenchmen, came together at Maxburg^[1], which overlooks Hambach near Neustadt in the Palatinate, to demand a free and united Germany and a confederation of European nations. The speakers enthusiastically celebrated a common, liberal Europe. Very few Germans today know that it was here, at the Hambach Castle, that the black-red-and-gold national flag was waved for the first time as a symbol of democracy and fatherland. During my tenure as minister president of Rhineland-Palatinate, I had an original flag from 1832 hung in the plenary room of the state parliament in Mainz.

[...]

It was especially important for me to be spiritually rooted in my regional homeland. I was raised in Ludwigshafen; I learned to walk and had my first experiences in the Palatinate, and it will always be my home and is where I will be buried. This love for my home has given me much strength. Connections to one's roots—for example, Konrad Adenauer's ties to the Rhineland or Theodor Heuss's to Swabia—are fundamental. A regional consciousness is not provincial. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was hardly understood in Weimar on account of his Frankfurt dialect. Homeland and fatherland belong together. This is why I often said: "The Palatinate is my homeland, Germany is my fatherland, and Europe is our future."

[...]

NOTES

^[1] A colloquial name for the Hambach Castle—eds.

Source: Helmut Kohl, "Heimat Europa," in *Erinnerungen, 1930–1982*. Munich, 2004, pp. 25–29.

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Recommended Citation: Europe as Homeland (Retrospective Account, 2004), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1161>> [July 03, 2025].