

Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker on the Meaning of Being German (1986)

Abstract

In this wide-ranging reflection, Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker tries to provide a positive answer to the question of what it means to be German by pointing to history, language, geography, culture, and democracy as unifying factors. For Weizsäcker, bringing Europe back together again is the defining future task of the Germans.

Source

What Is “German” Actually?

For one thing, being German is a natural circumstance. It is a consequence of the fact of being born and raised in Germany, speaking the German language, naturally feeling at home here, and thus being part of the German people. I am German, just as a Frenchman is a Frenchman and an Italian an Italian. It is neither a flaw nor a merit. It was not freely chosen, just as the time in which we live and that leaves its mark on us, the end of the twentieth century, was not freely chosen.

[...]

The fact that I am German permeates my life in many ways, whether I am aware of it or not. The German traditions of history, of thought and culture, of emotions, of faith have influenced my history, my culture, my emotions, and my faith. I have to deal with these traditions, whether through approval, rejection, or indifference. My Germanness confronts me in the historically influenced form that it has assumed in my time. I am determined by it, but I am not totally at its mercy, without a will of my own. Because human beings are free. Even if they cannot control the time and place of their birth, they can indeed influence and change the conditions under which they live. They can give new substance to the traditions that have been passed down through history. Human beings have always done that. All human history is transformation and change. History is thus the most significant evidence we have of human freedom.

If we look at things from this perspective, then my Germanness is not an inescapable fate, but rather a task. The question “What is ‘German,’ actually?” then becomes a question that I must answer to myself and before history. I share the responsibility for giving this term a substance that I can account for. In order to find my own interpretation of being German, I must deal with the history of the concept, with its substance, and thus with the history of the Germans.

I.

We Germans have a hard time dealing with this today. The history of the German Reich in this century and the terrible crimes committed in the name of Germans have blemished the term *German* and ultimately led to the division of Germany. Many people think that we Germans are suffering from an identity crisis. If we say that someone loses his identity, then we mean that that person is sick. Are we Germans sick in this sense? Have we lost our orientation with regard to our history and our identity? Do we no longer know who or what we are?

I am convinced that this is not the case at all. We have our characteristics that distinguish us from other peoples. We find them in our history and geographical location, in our language and culture, in

intellectual creativity, and in the statehood, social structure, and economic achievements of the two German states, in our relations to neighbors and other peoples. Our historical heritage has passed on to us both bright and dark chapters. It does not relieve us of the task nor rob us of the ability to confront these distinguishing features. We are people, just like others.

II.

[...]

Nationalism has remained in all European states. In Germany, it built up [...] and assumed extreme forms upon a foundation of severe social and economic hardship. Hitler claimed that the German nation represented the highest of all values. He granted it the right to rule the world, just because it was German. He and his supporters sought to justify this horrible rubbish historically and biologically. They rewrote history, more radically than ever before. They sought to explain the uniqueness of the German nation by virtue of its nature, by virtue of the Germanic race, which was granted the right to dismiss all other races as inferior and to physically annihilate an entire people, the Jews, for racist reasons. The consequence of these horrendous ideas was war with half the world. In the occupied territories, Jews and others were rounded up and murdered. The genocide ran its course and all of this happened expressly in the name of Germans.

Germany was destroyed, defeated, occupied, and divided. The word “German”—what does it mean after all this?

[...]

IV.

What is German with respect to language? We have agreed to designate the High German language as “German.” It is actually a mixture of different languages whose elements had been brought together by the Saxon Court Chancellery to form a new synthetic language. Martin Luther filled it with vibrant life. We have become accustomed to viewing Frisian, Alemannic, Bavarian, Hessian, and so forth, as German dialects. But these dialects are actually the original German languages.

[...]

V.

Geography plays a substantial and particularly difficult role in defining what is German. What is German land? Anyone leafing through a historical atlas of Europe will find a different territory of the German empire on almost every page and, depending on the point of view, each one can be considered either partially or totally German.

[...]

VI.

When examining language, geography, and history in order to determine what is German, amidst the confusing wealth of information that we encounter, we also find the attempt to define the basic and enduring elements of German national character. Otto Bauer described the nation as a “community of character that has developed out of a community of fate.” What constitutes fate and whether it is the cause or result of a German character can be left open. In any case, the question regarding character has been posed quite often and with many diverse and fascinating results. According to Tacitus, the ancient Germans were morally pure, hospitable, proud, brave, and noble. During the time of the migration of the

peoples, the Germanic tribes were described as savage and cruel, a historical memory that is today still tied to the Germanic tribe of the Vandals.

German classicism strove to elevate us to a people of poets and thinkers. During the Biedermeier period, politically powerless philistinism was considered a typical German trait. At one time the passion and force of “storm and stress” [*Sturm und Drang*] were regarded as typically German; at another time it was Eichendorff’s vibrant songs of the soul and nature. Once it was our special talent for music, and then it was our supposedly special aptitude for industriousness and discipline, which can be put to use for both good and evil. Some people say we cannot be elegant and attribute to us the crude wit of Hans Sachs, while others see the German spirit precisely in the polished language of Lessing, Heine, or Nietzsche.

[...]

VII.

German history did not end in 1945. For four decades there has been a liberal democracy on German soil. This, too, is part of our history—a good part. When Germany is spoken of today, then freedom, a social welfare state under the rule of law, and democracy are implied.

[...]

Our division is an especially heavy burden. The people in the GDR bear the brunt of it. They live under a state and an alliance of “real existing socialism” that determines their experiences and their lives. The term “German” is significantly marked by the political fate of division, but it did not undergo division itself. The people in the GDR are Germans, just as we are.

[...]

Despite its being at the periphery of both East and West, Germany remains influenced by the conditions of its location at the heart of Europe. Although this center is divided, it remains the center. There are two key factors that have a special effect on this situation.

The first is the western connection of the Federal Republic of Germany. We are part of the group of Western democracies. This Western connection to our liberal and social state under the rule of law is absolute and irrevocable. It is the internal value system that binds us to other states that are committed to the same internal principles.

The second key factor is our sense of belonging together with the Germans of the GDR. From this comes our goal, which is especially underscored by the centrality of our geographical location: to live in peace with all our close and more distant neighbors in the East, despite our differing internal systems. The center of the continent should not foment conflicts, but instead strengthen forces that promote peace across political blocs. For Germans, this is more urgent in this time of division and this nuclear age than it was in the days of Bismarck or even King Heinrich.^[1]

The situation that results from our ties to the West and our will for balance with the East often makes Germans, as well as our neighbors, feel uncomfortable. It is true that the division has placed a huge burden on the people and denies them their human rights. It is also true that there is a German Question that is both open and uncomfortable.

[...]

“The German Question will remain open as long as Brandenburg Gate remains closed” is an apt saying. It gets to the core of the unresolved German Question. It concerns the freedom of the people. Nowhere can

this be felt more clearly than in the center of the divided Berlin. But it affects all Germans and all Europeans no less.

[...]

Today as well, the German Question exists within the tension-field of unity and freedom. But it is different than it used to be. At the core of the German Question is freedom. Any progress in the German Question made at the expense of freedom would be a step in the wrong direction.

Not only Berlin and Germany are divided. The community of Europeans is also divided. The European powers have fought each other for stability or supremacy long enough. They had the same historical and cultural roots, but in the struggle for power and through excessive nationalism, the consciousness of the community of European peoples receded into the background.

[...]

These topics were also discussed at the European Conference on Security and Cooperation in Helsinki. Unity of the Europeans does not mean state unity or the equality of political systems, but a common path in history, moving forward with respect for human dignity. The German Question in this sense is a European task. To use peaceful means in working toward such a goal in Europe is above all the responsibility of the Germans.

NOTES

[1] King Heinrich I was a tenth-century monarch of the eastern Frankish realm and thereby an ancestor of what was later to become Germany—eds.

Source: Richard von Weizsäcker, “Was ist das eigentlich: deutsch?” in *Reden und Interviews*, vol. 2, pp. 395–412.

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