

“Talk Is Cheap” (1989)

Abstract

Against the backdrop of growing anti-foreigner sentiment, the author makes critical mention of the fact that demands for reunification were being increasingly seized upon by radical right-wing groups, whereas the majority of Germans in both East and West had come to accept the country's division. This acceptance, he writes, was also accompanied by a lack of interest in the GDR on the part of many West Germans.

Source

[...]

In the forty years that Germany has been divided into two states, we have proven what some Soviets and Americans, as I know, never believed at the outset: the Germans, capable and thorough and obedient as they are, have made their country's division work. Both states are model students in NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the GDR is an example for Poland, Hungary, and now even for the Soviet Union.

And what about us? We offer permanent lessons on how to deal with communists—carefully measured reason and as little condescension as possible—so that even the CDU has learned how to do this.

That most West Germans take little serious interest in the other Germans, that most citizens of the Federal Republic have, in fact, turned their backs on the East Germans—who gets upset about this?

That emigrants from the GDR are also feeling the effects of xenophobia, that the growing number of visitors from the GDR should finally be treated as economically welcome guests, that instead of being forced to make humiliating visits to the welfare office to pick up their “welcome money”^[1] (maybe up to three hundred DM a year), they should be able to exchange their hard-earned money with us in the regular fashion—who in this country is really thinking about this?

Once upon a time there was a beautiful big country, almost a hundred and twenty years ago. We gambled away this German Empire [*Reich*], rather like “Hans in Luck.”^[2] Nevertheless, there are still plenty of young people running around—they are naïve, neither adequately informed in school, nor well-cared for by our ruthlessly competitive society, who sport clothing that reads, “I’m proud to be a German,” and in this way demonstrate their xenophobia.

Time and again, reasonable people in this country have warned of the consequences, especially for young people, of having millions of people unemployed, and they have also reminded us how we arrived at 1933. Reunification slogans can also be heard from these young right-wingers.

Certainly, there are also people in the GDR voicing slogans like these, although unemployment is surely not the cause over there, but rather the lack of opportunity for travel and, for young people, boredom. Furthermore, many are discouraged and resigned because hardly anything is changing in their state compared with Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union.

Regarding a German question that may or may not be open, we are happy to talk about a common European house, or about a German nation or a cultural nation that still exists. Talk is cheap. And, after all, everyone was concerned with himself until the point at which we became the way we are. I realize [...] this final sentence sounds neither hopeful nor pithy. But nor is an easy answer on the horizon!

NOTES

[1] Citizens of the GDR were entitled to “welcome money” in the amount of 100 DM from the Federal Republic of Germany—trans.

[2] Written by the Brothers Grimm, “Hans in Luck” is the story of a young servant who carelessly parted with a lump of gold earned for seven years of service—trans.

Source: “Mußten wir werden, wie wir sind?,” *Metall* 1989, n. 10; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*. Munich, 1993, p. 45.

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