

Kulturpolitik versus Aussenpolitik in the Past Sixty Years

By Frank Trommler

- How did German *auswärtige Kulturpolitik* develop?
- What is its role today?

When Willy Brandt, the West German foreign minister in the first grand coalition of the 1960s, engaged in the revamping of foreign policy—which culminated in the reversal of the overt confrontation with the Warsaw Pact countries in the famed *Ostpolitik* in 1970—he included the cultural representation of the Federal Republic abroad, called *auswärtige Kulturpolitik* or foreign cultural policy. There were many elements indeed that needed revamping, the most important being the funding and the overall concept of pursuing an official German cultural presence in other countries. Increasing the funding became a matter of course during the cultural euphoria of the 1970s after the Bundestag received the report of the Enquete Commission for Foreign Cultural Policy, initiated by Berthold Martin on behalf of the CDU/CSU-Fraktion, and delivered in 1975. The much manipulated threat of losing out in the cultural war against the forceful appearance of the East German state on the international stage added sufficient pressure. However, revamping the overall concept of this policy against ingrained traditions within the Foreign Ministry and its cadre of mostly conservative diplomats was not a matter of course. Even after Brandt, as chancellor, and his team, most prominently Ralf Dahrendorf and Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, enhanced the standing of *Kulturpolitik* within *Aussenpolitik* by declaring it its “third pillar,” propagating new guiding principles (*Leitlinien*) of a less elitist and more open and anthropologically based concept of culture, it took many years and altercations with conservative politicians and diplomats before its representatives could be sure that it had taken hold. Historical irony has it that it had run its course when the unification of the two German states occurred in 1990. That was at a time when the predicament for German foreign cultural policy changed again.

What were those traditions that shaped *auswärtige Kulturpolitik* since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949? First and foremost: in the beginning, the new state did not have sovereignty, and therefore did not pursue an official cultural foreign policy. And when sovereignty was granted in 1955 and Konrad Adenauer left the Foreign Ministry to Heinrich von Brentano, the basic abstinence from this kind of international outreach remained, leaving the resumption of foreign contacts mostly to private initiatives. The awareness of the cultural isolation of the Federal Republic in the 1950s might have played into this policy of abstinence. It might even have been realistic, a part of Adenauer’s *Realpolitik* of Western integration and Cold War confrontation with the East. But it confirmed a long-standing tradition of diplomats—not only German ones—that anything that cannot fully be measured in terms of interest, power, or benefit should be avoided. It makes for bad bedfellows, instigates embarrassing situations, and hampers the career. The fact that the Nazi propaganda machine had left a trail of suspicion against anything that could be construed as German grandstanding added to this abstinence.

And yet, while this policy seems not unrealistic, later insights into the personnel of the Foreign Service and its amazing continuities from Ribbentrop’s to Adenauer’s bureaucracies shed a somewhat different light on the lack of a genuinely new policy in this area. They illuminate the fact that the official position concerning foreign cultural policy—that it was established mainly to serve Germans abroad and otherwise would facilitate some scientific and personal, at times artistic, contacts beyond the borders—

represented a continuation of earlier practices without the Nazi imprint. How strong these continuities were can be seen in the work of Franz Thierfelder, the long-time director of the Stuttgart *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen*, who, after his departure from the *Deutsche Akademie* in 1937, articulated much of the German cultural approach toward the Balkans during World War II and used similar vocabulary around 1950 when preparing for a postwar foreign cultural policy. Or Fritz von Twardowski, who headed the Department of Foreign Cultural Policy of the Foreign Ministry during the war years when this ministry was fully immersed in a cultural offensive that was to complement Hitler's New Order. Adenauer hired him as the press secretary of the new federal government. Pointing to the reemergence of these individuals in the areas of official representation of post-Nazi Germany should not re-open the old accusation of Nazism in the early Federal Republic but rather clarify why there was little incentive to revamp the intellectual and moral side of the cultural policy toward other countries.

These continuities might help explain the maintenance of well-trodden staples of German classical culture instead of promoting expressions of the intellectual and literary renewal of Germany in the conduct of a foreign policy that otherwise was highly sensitized to the burden of the Nazi past from its beginnings under Adenauer. Of course, this renewal, which involved a heavy dose of criticism of the Nazi past of federal bureaucracies, did not pick up speed until the *Spiegel* affair in 1962 and the intensive public debates instigated by writers of the Group 47, among them Hochhuth, Grass, Richter, Walser, and Peter Weiss. And whatever writers, film makers, artists, and students brought to the fore in order to stir up the German public to face the Nazi crimes and engage in the building of an open democratic society was not exactly the stuff that diplomats cared to show to other peoples. Yet the other peoples cared. They wanted to know whether this new Germany that had made itself into an economic power and gained stature by its intensive collaboration with the U.S., claiming superiority over the communist East, had intellectually and artistically recovered from the Nazi collapse.

The ascent of the Goethe-Institut, the German cultural institute, in more than a hundred countries in the 1970s is a central chapter in the presentation of the intellectual recovery of Germany, at least the Federal Republic, to which the career of the New German Film with movies by Fassbinder, Schlöndorff, Herzog, von Trotta, and others contributed a popular flair. Thanks to the wise decision of cultural politicians in the 1920s, the Goethe-Institut had been founded outside of the Foreign Ministry, as was the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Humboldt Foundation. After the *Leitlinien* of the Brandt government in 1970 reaffirmed an open presentation of what was best in contemporary German culture, this quasi-independence of *Mittlerorganisationen* (organizations conducting cultural exchange and presentation outside of the Foreign Service) guaranteed a younger generation of cultural officials the leeway to implement a cultural policy that had never been presented abroad. At the same time it guaranteed trouble with those ambassadors, diplomats, and politicians who maintained the old credo of raising the flag (*Flagge zeigen*) as the main function of *auswärtige Kulturpolitik*. Both Franz Joseph Strauss and Helmut Kohl intervened several times against *Nestbeschmutzer*, as artists and intellectuals were called who criticized the Federal Republic. These incidents, as disconcerting as they were for the participants, probably did more to establish the image of a democratically engaged West Germany than the pronouncement of diplomats and politicians.

With the unification in 1990 the predicament for German foreign cultural policy has changed, albeit not over night. Its goal of engaging other countries, at least their elites, in the cultural recovery of the country after the Nazi years was once more intensely propagated toward the countries of eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And the newly united country went through a phase of intense confrontation of its common past in the crimes of the Holocaust. But this phase, in which Chancellor Kohl invested ten million Deutschmarks in the teaching of the German language in eastern Europe, came

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to a close in the later 1990s. Diplomats and cultural officials were mostly haggling over moneys, not programs. Joschka Fischer, the foreign minister, made an attempt in 2000 to articulate a new mission for the extensive and somewhat stale apparatus of foreign cultural policy as he projected it as an early warning system in a world of cultural clashes that could explode into political and military clashes. Clearly in the harness of foreign policy, this preventive function of cultural contacts lacked incentives for intellectual and artistic distinction that needs to remain, aside from teaching the language, a core component of cultural exchange.

While the Goethe-Institut tried to recoup part of its mission in this area, the other *Mittlerorganisationen*, especially the DAAD and the Humboldt Foundation, moved into the center with their sponsorship of scientific exchange which commands more and more attention. In a world of European integration, international organizations, and immediate Internet communication, the notion of promoting a national culture and language is easily outmaneuvered by the proclamation of universal transfer of ideas and practices. Newer strategies, broadly discussed in a large conference at the Foreign Ministry in Berlin by representatives of all walks of life (*Menschen bewegen – Kultur und Bildung in der deutschen Außenpolitik*) and advocated by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier with new financial commitments in 2006, tend to erase the divisions between the communication and exchange agendas of *Kulturpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik*.

There can be no doubt that the decentralized form of foreign cultural policy in the Federal Republic has opened a more creative and attractive exchange with other countries at a time when West German foreign policy was restricted by the Cold War and the strong dependence on the U.S. Such an assessment need not be seen as an indictment of politicians and diplomats—although it came close for the earlier decades—but rather as a description of different roles that were played by those in the diplomatic straightjacket and others who did not have to internalize the Hallstein Doctrine and other sovereignty directives. Aside from the most important transfer route to the outside world, the economic one, both roles are part of the success story of modern German democracy. This story needs a narrative that does not straighten out the altercations and detours on this road. They document more of this democracy than streamlined foreign policy reports.

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