

Germany at 60 in Europe

By Jeffrey J. Anderson

How has Germany's role in Europe changed in the twenty years since the Wall fell?

To what extent has shifting historical memory impacted Germany's foreign policy?

Is a more assertive Germany a better partner for the U.S.?

2009 finds Germany awash in history. The parade of major anniversaries is almost overwhelming. After a quiet start to the year, May presented two major dates: the 60th anniversaries of the ending of the Berlin Blockade and the founding of the Federal Republic. After a summer lull, the 70th anniversary of Germany's invasion of Poland falls on September 1. In October, the 20th anniversary of the first Monday demonstration in Leipzig takes place. And finally, the month of November offers up two notable dates: the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the 40th anniversary of the SPD's ratification of the Godesberger Program. The list is an out-of-sequence capsule history of modern Germany—the plunge into the abyss of world war; the slow path to redemption through democracy; the hardening of the Cold War and the division of Germany; the embrace of a great political consensus around the social market economy; the yearning for change in the other half of Germany; the beginning of the end of division.

The major anniversary marking formal unification falls beyond 2009; history is never quite so tidy. The only other dimension missing from the collection of 2009 anniversaries-as-history is Europe. If one steps back even a little bit, the bookends are readily visible. Last year Germans and their neighbors celebrated the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, which launched the comprehensive European integration project that has culminated in the European Union. And almost exactly two years from now, Europe and the rest of the world will observe the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which marked the formal end of the Cold War, and ushered in a new and still evolving international system. Both of these developments—Europe and the broader East-West conflict as it related to the continent—have been central components of the recent narrative of German political development.

An anniversary is a time for remembering, for thinking about how the past informs the present and future. Twenty years ago, Germans were in a reflective mood, having just celebrated the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of their postwar democracy. And in the days and weeks following the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Germans (and not a few of their neighbors, not to speak of Americans) drew on memories to predict a rapid parting of ways for Germany and its European neighbors. These critics feared that unified Germany's political future would be patterned on its dismal pre-war past. Their pessimism looked on four decades of peace and prosperity in West Germany—months earlier, the Federal Republic had celebrated the 40th anniversary of its founding—as an interlude of sorts, one whose end would see the country gravitate back toward an aggressive, unattached foreign policy. Germany would soon seek to hoist its western anchor, and chart its own way in Mitteleuropa; some even forecasted a drive for nuclear weapons. Suffice it to say that the intervening twenty years revealed that the power of these historical memories has waned considerably, to say the least.

In 1989, there were a few observers who maintained that a more contemporary set of historical memories, drawing on the Bonn Republic's formula of stable democracy, social market economy, and membership in Western European and transatlantic

networks, would have a tonic effect on a unified Germany. When it came to foreign policy, however, the older pre-war memories still mattered, but benignly—in effect, leavened by forty years of democracy, capitalism, and western integration. Countering the dour outlook described above, these analysts predicted a continuation of two trademark characteristics of West German foreign policy that flowed from memories of world war, the attendant crimes against humanity, and the punishing aftermath of total defeat: a reflexive multilateralism (or, put another way, a distaste for unilateral initiatives); and an innate willingness to pool national sovereignty to further the European integration project.

In retrospect, history has been kinder to the optimists. Germany has been content to continue swimming in the European sovereignty pool—indeed, more so, given the decisions in the early 1990s to commit to monetary union and to push for intensified political integration. And as such, indeed almost by definition, the vast majority of its foreign policy actions have been multilateral—that is, defined and embraced by the joint decision-making processes that the European Union utilizes. Few if any of its policy positions in Europe have altered to any appreciable extent as a result of its larger territory and population, or the new interests and actors residing in the former GDR that came on board with unification. Although unified Germany is in some respects a different country, it is the same country in key respects.

And yet, although this is a large part of the story, it is not the whole story. In other words, those who looked to a more comprehensive set of historical memories to predict the path a unified Germany would take within Europe were only partly correct. For the fact of the matter is, the “Germany in Europe” we observe today, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is not simply an older and larger version of the Bonn Republic. Germany cuts a different figure in Europe than it did twenty years ago. Germany has grown more assertive and self-confident, and at the same time it is far less idealistic. We are fast approaching the 10th anniversary of the last time (2000) a heavyweight German politician (Joschka Fischer) called for a “United States of Europe.” German enthusiasm for enlargement has cooled considerably, as “sticker shock” over the recent expansions to the east and the specter of Turkish accession have settled firmly in the minds of both politicians and citizens. The Germans, who could be counted on among the larger member states to push hard for widening and deepening of the EU, have adopted a much more cautious and self-regarding stance. Support for the embattled Lisbon Treaty has been tempered by an understanding among elites that the limits of what the public will tolerate from the European Union may well have been reached already, a conclusion that is underscored by the recent ruling on the Lisbon Treaty by the Federal Constitutional Court. One gets the feeling that, apart from a small number of necessary additions to the European space—specifically, the Balkans—and necessary institutional fixes—Lisbon—the *finalité politique* or *Endstation* sought by the Germans is actually quite near.

As such, the overarching goal of Germany’s European policy can no longer be described as idealistic or progressive. In other words, Germany does not stand before its European partners as weighty champion of a wider and deeper Europe. Instead, it has become a status quo power within the European Union, anxious to conserve. All of which suggests that for Germans, the historical memories of the wartime experience are being gradually but inevitably eclipsed by a more concrete postwar memory set. Gone are the days when Germany practiced a foreign policy of penance, which led it to walk and talk softly, and let others carry the big stick. Instead, Germany practices a more hard-headed, practical foreign policy within Europe, one motivated by a sense that something of great value was created in the sixty years since the founding of its second democracy, something worth conserving.

This new mindset has begun to inform Germany’s dealings with the world outside of

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Europe as well. In fact, it is interesting that two of the most prominent episodes in the past decade where this new stance has been on display have involved relations with the United States. In 2003, the joint efforts of Germany and France to carve out a principled position to counter the U.S. drive to carry its global war on terrorism into Iraq can be interpreted as an early and only partially successful attempt to preserve a distinctive European position on international security affairs, one emphasizing diplomacy and restraint. More recently, Germany has emerged as chief spokesperson for a cautious, prudent approach to the global financial crisis, resisting American overtures to engage in additional stimulus spending and emphasizing the need to regulate the market excesses that sparked the crisis. Concerns about the strength and stability of the euro play an important part in German policymakers' thinking here; a weakened or collapsing euro would not only threaten one of the pillars of the German model of political economy, but it would call into question public toleration and support for the then-controversial decision by the Germans to give up the DMark in exchange for European political integration at Maastricht in 1991.

There is reason to believe that a more assertive Germany, motivated more openly by national interests but still acting with and through Europe, makes for a more effective and reliable transatlantic partner for the United States. For one, it suggests that the Germans will speak and act in ways that are more comprehensible to U.S. foreign policymakers, who frankly always seemed a bit baffled by Bonn's breezy talk of shared sovereignty and European federation. For another, it means that increasingly there will be greater internal consistency in what the Germans say they want, how they act to get what they want, and what they say they can deliver, both inside Europe and in dealings with the outside world. As such, Germany becomes a more formidable negotiator in dealings with the United States. At the same time, though, it means that Germany becomes a more formidable partner in the transatlantic relationship. And so, in this season of anniversaries, we would do well to remember that the shifting salience of historical memory in Germany is a cause not for concern, but for considerable hope.

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