

Welt am Sonntag

The Crisis in America Has Already Taken Root in Europe

John Kornblum 03.10.2020

Many Americans share Donald Trump's anger with Europe. This should come as no surprise. Europe's Image is much different than it was 30 years ago. Today it is threatened with decline and stagnation. In the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, things were much different.

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Few would disagree with the eminent British historian Timothy Garton-Ash who wrote recently that the past three decades had been the best years in the history of the German nation. The Federal Republic has become one of the world's most prosperous, democratic and respected countries.

But for most Germans, time has rushed by so quickly that they have had little time to digest the great leaps of the past sixty or even ninety years, for that matter. Next year will be the 60th anniversary of the Berlin Wall. Ninety years ago, the Third Reich and the Holocaust were still in the future.

These worlds may feel like ancient history, but in the 150 years since founding of the Bismarck Reich, Germany and Europe have been riding an express train through history. New railway coaches are added every year, but the old ones seem never to be decoupled. Neither the 1000 year Hitler Reich, nor the eternal Berlin Wall proclaimed by Erich Honecker, survived even for 30 years. But they are still there to haunt us.

Ironically, the past before 1945 has been so discredited, that each year it plays a bigger role in German and European political consciousness. Making sure it does not return has become a central feature of 21st century German identity. Rather than modeling themselves on the great achievements of German science, industry, philosophy and culture, young Germans are expected to orient themselves on the task of never forgetting the crimes of Bismarck and Hitler. Today's "European peace project," has taken on an almost mystic importance. Rather than building pride in their futures, Europeans are consumed by avoiding the past. Is there any wonder that there is no European Facebook, Amazon or Google?

Perhaps it is easier for someone like me, who beginning in 1970, was privileged to participate in virtually every step leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall, to appreciate how many old ideas had to be discarded if reunification was to be achieved. Today it all seems to have been so obvious, but the two decades between 1970 and 1990 were anything but hopeful. During the 1980's for example, much of Germany seems to have abandoned dreams of a reunified Europe.

In 1945, it was not self-evident that the principles of Western pluralistic society would guide the future of postwar Germany. The West was not yet comfortable with the idea of accepting Germany into its community of nations. The Soviet Union and the Berlin blockade clarified that goal. Even today, NATO remains the essential foundation for European integration. But also today, pollsters have reported that nearly 40% of the German population believes that China would be a more comfortable partner than the United States.

Helmut Kohl was fond of recalling how before choosing October 3, 1990 as the official date for German reunification, he had first checked with the weather bureau. He wanted to guarantee a sunny start for the new chapter of German history. The Climatologists assured him that the first week of October was almost always sunny and warm.

In fact, on 3. October, 1990, the weather in Germany was "mixed." Not bad, but not too good either. Some sun, some rain, some clouds. Temperature around 15 degrees Celsius. Maybe that was the perfect omen for the complicated future which awaited this reborn European power.

Kohl wanted sunshine because he knew that most of the rest of the world was watching events in Germany with a mixture of disbelief and apprehension. Hardly anyone had expected Germany to be reunited and many were not sure it was a good idea. France and Britain worked actively to block it. Russians were too traumatized to do much of anything.

Only the Americans seemed sincerely happy to see Germany put back together. German television broadcast a pre-recorded speech by President George H.W. Bush. Bush concluded his remarks by declaring: "At this moment of celebration, as we look forward with you to a future of hope and promise, let me say, on behalf of all Americans, may God bless the people of Germany."

Our own strong German heritage certainly played a role in the positive American reaction. But Bush's good wishes also reflected a vision of America's interests which most Germans and Europeans preferred not to see.

Bush understood that the end of the Cold War would mean a decline in American willingness to remain engaged in Europe. He believed that whatever the burdens of the past, Germany was destined not only to become Europe's leading power, but also to take its

place among the leading nations of the world. He hoped that Germany, as Europe's central power, would lift from us some of the responsibility for maintaining the security and prosperity of the West..

President Bush had in fact already suggested in a speech delivered in Mainz eighteen months earlier, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, that Germany become a "partner in leadership" with the United States. During the next 15 years, the US and Germany did in fact take the lead in building a stronger partnership which today unites democratic peoples from the center of Europe to the shores of the Pacific.

But I exaggerate only slightly when I suggest that that was the easy part. Thirty years later many of the conditions which helped solidify the Atlantic community after 1990 have been swept away by revolutionary change. The effects of what some call the fourth Industrial revolution are already being felt. And of course a global pandemic has been ruthless in its attacks on modern society. Increasingly, voters on both sides of the Atlantic are focusing on their own well-being. The great era of rules based international institutions seems to be nearing its end.

The fact is that Donald Trump's anger with Europe is actually good politics for him at home. As they dive deeply into the Facebook and Instagram world, many Americans are beginning to wonder why we pay so much of the Western burden.

Similar reactions are evident in Germany. Rejection of Corona limitations has spread to both sides of the Atlantic. Pressing issues such as immigration, refugees, climate change, military defense, minority rights, sexual orientation and many more are beginning to divide Western societies more than they unite them. For anyone wishing to look carefully, the pressures on each side of the Atlantic are nearly identical.

As the new Tesla factory in Brandenburg so dramatically demonstrates, for the first time in over 100 years, Europe and Germany are no longer in the forefront of technological change. At a point when the rest of the world is bursting with innovation, much of Europe has come to resemble an archaic version of its own past. Overcoming this situation will require a fundamentally new Atlantic and the European narrative.

However hesitant it may be, Germany is steadily becoming the nation which defines the Western vision, for both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, today's crisis in America has already reached Europe. Politics in Europe will in coming years increasingly resemble those of the United States., Citizens will increasingly wonder why 500 million educated, prosperous Europeans cannot exert more influence on their own futures. The answer to this question will also be important to defining the future American global role. As Europe's leading nation, Germany will play a central role in composing the new European narrative. Hopefully, it will not be too long before our mutual trust enables us to repeat the achievements of Atlantic unity from the 1990's.

