

## Lessons from the Century of Extremes

What does Germany's international responsibility mean?

by Heinrich August Winkler

The “Age of Extremes” was the memorable title of Eric Hobsbawm’s book about the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> No other country has as much reason to reflect about the “short century” as Germany does, because no other country shaped the first half of this century as much as Germany did. This is true not only due to the significant role that the German Empire played in causing World War I, the “great seminal catastrophe” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>2</sup> but also because without active German help, the seizure of power by the Russian Bolsheviks in November of 1917 – an epochal event that was of crucial importance for two other takeovers by totalitarian movements, that of the Italian fascists in 1922 and of the German national socialists in 1933 – would not have taken place. That World War I was followed, a quarter of a century later, by World War II, was not inevitable; but again: the later catastrophe cannot be explained without the seminal catastrophe of 1914.

Culturally, Germany was part of the West. It had joined in the great European emancipatory processes since the Middle Ages or even, in the case of the Protestant Reformation, set them into motion; and it had taken part in the European Enlightenment. Its ruling elites had refused, however, to accept major political consequences of the Enlightenment in the shape of the inalienable human rights, the sovereignty of the people and the representative democracy until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. World War I was waged by the German war ideologues as a war of the “ideas of 1914” against those of 1789. *Liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* were pitted against the declared belief in strong government, the *Volksgemeinschaft* and a “German socialism”. The Weimar Republic, the first German democracy, was regarded by the political right as a result of defeat, as the polity of the victors and thus “un-German”. The culmination of the German resentment against the West and its normative project, the ideas of the American revolution of 1776 and of the French revolution of 1789, was the rule of national socialism, the “German catastrophe”, as the historian Friedrich Meinecke termed it in 1946.<sup>3</sup>

Only after this second, now complete, defeat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did Western democracy assert itself in Germany, or at least the western part of thereof. This was the result of a conjoint effort of the Western allies, led by the United States, and the Weimarians who had learned their lesson and now became the mothers and fathers of Germany's *Grundgesetz*; those who had survived the "Third Reich" and were able to draw conclusions from the failure of democracy in 1918/19 for the building of a robust and functioning parliamentary democracy. The Federal Republic's Western integration and its contribution to the Western European unification process, undertaken by a center-right coalition led by Konrad Adenauer, were highly controversial at first. This changed with the Social Democrats' historical course correction in 1959/60.

A quarter of a century later, during the *Historikerstreit* in 1986 about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, Jürgen Habermas described the "unconditional opening of the Federal Republic towards the political culture of the West" as the great intellectual achievement of the West German postwar period, of which his generation in particular can be proud.<sup>4</sup> The philosopher's verdict gave birth to an era of a posthumous "Adenauer Left" – an informal coalition that, during the decade after the German reunification, even the Greens joined.<sup>5</sup>

Until the restoration of German unity, both German states enjoyed only limited sovereignty. After reunification, the rights reserved by the Allies with respect to Berlin and Germany as a whole ceased to apply, but the reunited country found it difficult to come to terms with its newly gained sovereignty. This became clear as early as during the First Gulf War but even more so in the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s. The Federal Constitutional Court's out-of-area decision of 12 July 1994 provided legal clarity about the conditions under which humanitarian and/or military actions by the German armed forces were permissible beyond NATO's borders.

In the following year, on 30 June 1995, the German parliament, with the votes of the Christian-Liberal coalition, approved the deployment of the *Bundeswehr* for the protection and support of the "rapid reaction force" in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A majority of Social Democrats, most of the Green party and the PDS voted against the mission. The Social Democrats' then-general secretary, Günter Verheugen, expressed his disappointment with the 45 party members who had broken ranks and voted in favor of the deployment by reminding them that, even after the great changes in Europe, Germany could not "become a normal country ... like other countries without such an abnormal history. Those who still do not

believe this should ask themselves what the newly opened Holocaust museum in Washington means”.<sup>6</sup>

Another three years later, Germany was confronted with the issue of its international responsibility once again. On 16 October 1998, just days before the formation of the first coalition government between the Social Democrats and the Green Party at federal level, parliament voted on the *Bundeswehr*'s participation in a potential NATO operation against the aggressive Serbian actions in the Kosovo. The mission was approved by a large majority, including the votes of most Social Democrats and members of the Green party. Once again, the Holocaust played a significant role in the justification of this humanitarian intervention – but this time as an argument *in favor* of an intervention intended to prevent genocide of the Kosovo Albanians. The reference to the National Socialists' crime against humanity may also have been used to counteract the residual doubts of the governing left about whether it would be possible to bring peace to the war-torn region by military means. But, unlike in 1995, in 1998/99, almost all of the members of the Social Democratic and the Green party were prepared to accept the consequences resulting from the increase in sovereignty obtained in 1990. Germany acted in concert with the other Western democracies, and it was left to small minorities to advocate a “special role” in view of the German past.<sup>7</sup>

Since the turn of the millennium, the use of Auschwitz as an argument in current policy debates has become less frequent – and that is a good thing, because every reference made to the annihilation of the European Jews in the context of current events carries the danger of instrumentalizing – and thus trivializing – the most horrific event in German and European history. To refer to the unique nature of the Holocaust for the purpose of not condemning other, more recent crimes, or in order to put them into perspective simply means that the reference to Auschwitz is being used to desensitize the audience to a violation of human rights. If such an argumentation is made in earnest, it must surely be the expression of a pathological learning process.

Germany's integration into the West always included close ties to the leading Western power, the United States. This does not, however, mean unquestioning adoption of Washington's positions. The refusal of the Social Democrat-Green coalition to participate in the Second Gulf War was well justified, both under international law and under political considerations, and represented an act of emancipation from an America which, under the leadership of George W. Bush, was calling its own fundamental values into question. A dissolution of the Western community of values does not follow from this transatlantic conflict, however.

When Europeans and Americans argue about fundamental issues, it is almost always a question of differing interpretations of common values. This applies to controversies about the death penalty and the state monopoly on violence, the relationship between religion and politics, a country's social and ecological responsibility and, not least, and most recently in connection with the NSA's global surveillance, the precedence of individual freedom over national security or vice versa. Western political culture has always been a culture of debate as well. This is based on the insight that Western democracies' common ground is solid enough to withstand differences and that these differences can even be regarded as opportunities for the further development of the common normative project.

The tensions between the United States and parts of Europe did not end with the younger Bush's presidency. In one case – the debate about a humanitarian intervention in the Libyan Civil War – Germany's ill-considered abstention in the United Nations Security Council meeting on 17 March 2011 put it in opposition not only to the United States, but also to two of its Western European allies, France and the United Kingdom. This represented an unprecedented self-isolation on the part of the Federal Republic.

Germany's "proven culture of restraint" with regard to military interventions, a phrase coined by then-foreign minister Klaus Kinkel in July 1994<sup>8</sup> and frequently quoted by his fellow liberal party member Guido Westerwelle, Germany's foreign minister during the conservative-liberal coalition government from 2009 to 2013, took on a whole new meaning on this occasion. Important Western allies increasingly started to regard it as a euphemism for an evasion of responsibility motivated by domestic policy considerations; a new, now more or less pacifist German "special path". This is also the background for President Joachim Gauck's repeated and well-founded admonitions that Germany take on greater international responsibilities – responsibilities in keeping with the country's economic and political weight in Europe and the world. When it comes to defending peace and human rights, this may include – as a last resort – military action by the *Bundeswehr*.

For quite some time now, the triple crisis of the European integration process has been added to the existing strains on the transatlantic relationship. The first of these, the Eurozone crisis, may have peaked by now but is far from over. The second crisis arises from the endangered state of democracy in several EU member states, first and foremost Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The extent of *this* threat to the European Union's cohesion continues to be underestimated; not least, because Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán enjoys the backing of the conservative and Christian democratic parties united in the European People's Party,

while Victor Ponta, his social democratic counterpart in Bucharest, can count on the understanding attitude of the European socialists. The two big party families appear to have reached an unspoken agreement to treat the other party's Victor (Viktor) as they would have their own Viktor (Victor) treated. Therefore, everything speaks for the suggestion made by political scientist Werner Müller to appoint an independent "Copenhagen Commission", which would – upon request by the European Commission or as the result of a petition – act when there is reason to believe that a member state is in violation of the 1993 Copenhagen accession criteria and recommend sanctions whenever applicable.<sup>9</sup>

The third crisis of the European integration process is the legitimization crisis of the European project per se, as manifested most recently in the electoral gains of populist parties on both sides of the party spectrum in the European Parliament elections at the end of May. Concerns pertaining to the increasingly independent momentum of the executive power in Brussels are not new, and they are largely justified. For far too long, decisions affecting the future of the community, not least in connection with the expansion process, have been made behind closed doors and were presented to the public as *faits accomplis*. The outcome of the ongoing power struggle between the European Parliament and the European Council is uncertain. In principle, a parliamentarization of the leadership of the Commission would be a step in the right direction because it would strengthen the European Parliament vis-à-vis the Commission. This holds true regardless of widely held doubts about whether the actual candidate proposed by the (old) parliament leadership is the right choice for the EU's political progress. The conservative *Spitzenkandidat* (a German term that is now making inroads into English) is seen, even by large swathes of his own supporters, as the embodiment of Europe as an "elitist project" and of the "carry on as before" attitude of a political class that seems to regard ever closer union as an end in itself that no longer requires justification.

In a conversation with Nils Minkmar (in the *FAZ* of 30 May), Jürgen Habermas asked those heads of state or government who want to see Jean-Claude Juncker leading the Commission to suggest an exit from the European Union to the countries opposing this outcome. Otherwise, so Habermas, the supporters of the more successful of the two most promising *Spitzenkandidaten* would be risking their own reputations as democrats. He continues: "In the event of an impasse, there is always the option to reconstitute the European Union in its existing institutions – a threat that not even Mr. Cameron should be able to ignore."<sup>10</sup>

An objection from Viktor Orbán's Hungary against Juncker as president of the European Commission can indeed be safely ignored by a majority of the European Council, but the

resistance from the United Kingdom is another matter. The British prime minister's ideas about a retransfer of responsibilities from Brussels to the nation states are a lot more worthy of discussion than anything Orbán has suggested. Germany and Europe cannot be interested in provoking a British departure from the union, which is a distinct possibility as it is. Nor can Germany have any interest in lastingly alienating the Netherlands and Sweden, who also have expressed reservations about Juncker as president of the European Commission. A European Union without these three countries would be more illiberal, protectionist and crisis-prone than the current club of 28, and even the exit of just the UK would significantly weaken the community on the global stage. A collision course that would result in such a radical change of the EU cannot be an option for the German government. Even the mere impression that Germany is rushing through an institutional reform of the European Union as it sees fit would be counterproductive.

If the parliamentarization of the leadership of the Commission could succeed without negative consequences for the unity of the EU, it would be a step in the right direction but still far from what has been – and must remain – a long-term goal of German politics: the European Union's development into a political union; in other words, a fundamental reform of the EU. This goal, however, is tied to a number of prerequisites, one of them being a common political culture. This can only be the political culture of the West – a culture that the EU has embraced both in the Copenhagen criteria and in its Charter of Fundamental Rights of the year 2000. As the cases of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria show, this is far from a consensus among the EU 28 for the time being. A political union would moreover require a fundamental agreement of all member states with respect to the foundations of an economic and fiscal reform agenda – an agreement that could only be achieved by means of a Europe-wide public discourse. However, such a reform-oriented consensus does not exist even where it would be most required: within the monetary union and between its two biggest members, Germany and France.

A closer union of the member states in favor of reform, a “union *within* the union” *without* France cannot be Germany's aspiration, however; as such a construct would fatally resemble the kind of Central Europe that the liberal politician and writer Friedrich Naumann, at the time regarded as a moderate Wilhelminian imperialist, advocated in his book *Mitteleuropa* in 1915, almost exactly one hundred years ago.<sup>11</sup> It would be the path from a German half hegemony towards a complete hegemony over Europe. As long as there is no solid consensus for reform between France and Germany (which has been made even more unlikely by the

Front National's victory in the European elections), the only option remaining is thus an increase in intergovernmental cooperation even in areas not yet communitized, including, but not limited to, foreign and security policy. This kind of cooperation can certainly not be the final word on European policy, but as long as the Lisbon Treaty remains effective, the EU will depend on it to an almost existential degree.

How important it would be for Europe to speak with one voice is shown clearly by the Ukraine crisis. Future historians will probably come to the conclusion that the year 2014 was the end of an intermediate period in history – the time period that started a quarter of a century ago with the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe, found its historical symbol with the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and filled the world with the hope that the ideas of the Atlantic revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century would prevail, if not globally, then at least in the entire area of the then as yet existing Soviet Union.

Now the West will have to give up on this hope for the foreseeable future. Fourteen years after he was first elected president of Russia, Putin has made his intentions clear. He regards the Russian Federation as the counterbalance to the supposedly decadent West; as the speaker on behalf of all those powers in our multipolar world who oppose the universal applicability of human rights; as a friend to homophobes the world over and, in Europe, a reliable ally of all Eurosceptic parties across the entire political spectrum, and of all those who want to decouple Europe from America and break up the North Atlantic Alliance.

After the annexation of the Crimea, an act of ethnic nationalism that violated international law, Putin was given the benefit of the doubt not only on the left and the right fringes but also from the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations of the German business associations, active CSU politicians, some SPD elder statesmen and a surprising number of influential journalists. This worries some of the East Central European member states of EU and NATO, and justifiably so. Some people are beginning to wonder how deep Germany's Western integration really is, and whether Berlin would honor its commitments and be loyal to its allies if push came to shove. The supposedly "good tradition" of German-Russian special relations that is held in such high regard by supporters of the Alternative for Germany and others, is liable to evoke memories of a very different kind in Poland – those of the history of German-Russian "good relations" ranging from the partitions of Poland in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.

Germany does well to take the security interests of its East Central European neighbors – its partners in the European Union and NATO – at least as seriously as those of Russia. If NATO had rejected the aspiring members after 1991, East Central and South Eastern Europe would have become a zone of insecurity and instability – a new “intermediate Europe”, as in the period between the two world wars, in which nationalist and antidemocratic forces would have gained the upper hand almost everywhere. Germany has no reason to cease in its efforts to defuse the new East-West confrontation through diplomatic channels, to urge a national dialogue in Ukraine and a return to a policy of peaceful reconciliation of interests in Moscow. At the same time, however, German governments must make it abundantly clear that solo actions and seesaw politics between East and West are no options for Germany – in other words, that Germany’s Western integration is irrevocable.

The German opening towards the political culture of the West is the most important lesson drawn from the Age of Extremes. The commitment of Western democracies to the normative project of the West is only credible, however, if it is accompanied by a critical evaluation of the past. The ideas of 1776 and 1789 did not describe the realities of their time but they provided the standard against which the West has had to measure up ever since. The project thus became the corrective of a practice that pursued the direct opposite of the proclaimed values often enough. It developed a dynamic that turned the project into a process, and this process will not be complete until the inalienability of human rights is accepted worldwide. The West would give up on itself if it were ever to give up on this aim. The same applies to Germany which, seen from a historical perspective, still counts among the young Western democracies.



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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London 1994.

<sup>2</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations 1875-1890*, Princeton 1979, p.3

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, Wiesbaden 1947<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung*, in: „Historikerstreit“. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung, Munich 1987, p. 62-76 (75).

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich August Winkler, „Anschluß an den Westen“. Adenauer und der deutsche Sonderweg, in: id., *Auf ewig in Hitlers Schatten? Über die Deutschen und ihre Geschichte*, Munich 2007, p. 119 – 128 (127f.)

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West; Volume 2: 1933-1990*, Oxford University Press, p. 563

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 563

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 562-563

<sup>9</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *Wo Europa endet. Ungarn, Russland, Brüssel und das Schicksal der liberalen Demokratie*, Berlin 2013, p. 59ff.

<sup>10</sup> “Europa wird direkt ins Herz getroffen” (Jürgen Habermas in conversation with Nils Minkmar), in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 May 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, Berlin 1915.