

The Two Germanies since 1945

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I find the book in my bookcase. I recall when I bought it, it was back in 1988-89 when I was at Duke. I was intrigued at the time by the emergence of Germany out of the rubble of the war, finding that the first few postwar years were more interesting than the Second World War that had caused them. I was disappointed, and soon skipped reading the book, as it did not deliver what I had expected. It was no literary evocation of that period, as I had naively hoped for, it simply had no such ambitions. In fact it is a textbook, and as such turning out to possess the virtues of such a genre, namely lucidity, conciseness and factuality. It tells a story, not a very engaging one maybe, yet one that needs to be recalled and put in a perspective. As an after-dote to the momentous Postwar of Judt, with a far larger canvas and a longer duration, it nevertheless focuses on what was the core of that presentation. And the fact that it was written in 1987 adds another dimension, it becomes a historical document by itself, not just a historical documentation.

Germany was defeated. Totally defeated. There was no comparison with the end of the First World War, when the country had been spared any of the devastation on its own territory that is the inevitable effect of war. True it had suffered its share of fatalities in combat, but the Civilian population had been unaffected, at least by the direct effects of war, although suffering from the allied blockade. This relative state of being unscathed, also furnished the myth of the army having been undefeated, with momentous consequences for the beginning of a second act. In retrospect the First and Second World Wars were acts of the very same drama, which definitely was not apparent at the time. Although so close in time as to share common commanders, they almost appear to belong to entirely different epochs. The stalemate of trench warfare, an unprecedented hell, yet a gallant one; as opposed to a more classical one, with armies in swift motion, and an entirely different kind of hell. To soldiers yes, but not only to soldiers. One far more ruthless, but ironically not as rhetorically belligerent as the first. The gas-chambers played no role in the general consciousness when the war was waged, it thus provided no impetus nor any motivation. It would come later and retroactively impose on the German nation a terribly burden of shame, which it has been reluctant to accept, yet commendably ready to shoulder. A shame that seems only to have grown deeper by time, sullyng its history and identity, often unfairly, yet seemingly indelibly.

At the time of the early summer of 1945 the triumphs of the allied forces were complete. Germany had ceased to exist as a state, only remaining as a geographical entity. But overwhelming triumph creates its own problems, short of a genocidal mass-destruction of its population (to outdo the ones it had tried to perpetrate itself), the victors were saddled with the responsibility of feeding and protecting an impotent enemy population, at great costs to themselves. The Russians had taken the brunt, and they were eager to repay in kind. Large parts of Eastern Germany were ethnically cleansed by its population, thus creating the irony that a geographical entity, which in the final years of war had suffered

millions of fatalities, nevertheless was more populous than before the war. The housing situation was desperate, with about a quarter of all homes having been destroyed by, what it turned out to be, pointless efforts to break the German fighting morale. And even more desperate than housing was feeding. And this turned out to be an issue to open up the first rapture among the allies. The Russian were busy expropriating the industry and produce of what was essentially an agricultural part of the country, while the more industrial western zones, needed the food that the eastern part had traditionally provided. It was clear, at least to the Western victors with the possible exception of France¹, eager to revenge itself on its foe, that any solution to the problem of Germany had to be provided by its economic development towards self-sufficiency.

It is a miracle, inadequately explained², that Western Germany so quickly recovered economically, when it failed to do so after the First World War. But unlike the Russian sector, that was systematically pillaged, economic reforms and assistance were accorded the Western. First Bizonia, a administrative unit including the British and American sectors, and then Trizonia adding the French, were formed, more or less making the formation of what would soon become the state known as 'Bundesrepublik Deutschland'. This was not looked upon favourably by the Russians, and they decided to play their Berlin card.

Berlin was a true anomaly, being accorded a special status, to be jointly administered by the four allied powers, and situated in the middle of the Soviet zone. In fact 'topologically' it was an impossible situation, and by blocking the supply-routes the Soviets were pretty confident of making the situation for the West-Berlin population intolerable, thus causing an end to their anomalous situation and a subsequent incorporation of that city into its own sector. But with modern technology there was the possibility of air-lifts, and much to the surprise of contemporaries as well as later observers, the Soviets did not interfere with this loop-hole. While they formally may have been legally entitled to the move of obstructing land access, they were not entitled by the same treaties, to stop air-traffic. They decided to play by the rules, and as a consequence, the Berliners withered out the storm³. This was in 1948, and in retrospect probably provided the greatest risk there ever was of a Third World War. The Berlin crisis of 1961, resulting in the building of the Berliner Wall, the most potent of all Cold War symbols, was a purely defective move. There was no Third World War, although at the time, such a development may have seemed imminent, but the start of the Cold War. A state of continued tension only made possible by the threat of Nuclear retaliation. And in this stalemate, Germany would be the hostage, something that initially pulled them apart, as both halves became more tightly connected to their respective camps, but eventually this common predicament would fuse them. The most immediate outcome of the Berlin crisis of 1948 was that Germany, or least the western half was no longer considered an enemy.

¹ who was no victor at all, and had played a very marginal role even in its own liberation; but was nevertheless accorded the status of one

² In this book simply referred to as the 'Wirtschaftswunder', and in the work of Judt, partially explained by the fact that the previous regime had established a solid industrial infra-structure, that remained relatively unscathed through the war

³ Judt mentions some 200'000 flights during nine months, meaning about once every minute, figures born out by the present book

In the first postwar years unification of Germany was more or less a foregone conclusion. The occupation was sensed as being temporary, and the most natural thing would be to have a unified and neutral Germany, ideally militarily emasculated. This clearly was the official position of East-Germany, and it was also the position of SPD in the Western part. In the first years, Adenauer of the CDU and Schumacher of the SPD, embodied two different approaches. The anti-Nazi record of Adenauer has been made very much of, but as Judt points out, this was very spotty and definitely could not stand comparison with that of Schumacher, who had had his health broken during extended incarceration. The approach of Adenauer was to put unification on the back-burner and concentrate to get a viable Germany out of the western sectors, figuring that an economically strong western Germany would in the end provide the best bargaining chip available⁴. And as history would show, his approach was vindicated. After the Berlin crisis, a West-Germany was fashioned, and as a response the DDR was formed almost immediately thereupon⁵. The constitution of West-Germany was meant to be provisional, in order not to foreclose the possibility of an eventual re-unification. Suppressed as that issue was for most of the post-war years, both Germanies were careful not to once and for all seal off the possibility⁶, thus the issue of unification was easily revived at the fall of the wall. In fact one did not talk about a Constitution, just Grundgesetze, as if it was more in the nature of a judicial technicality than the formation of a nation. It is ironic that the structure of the West-German proto-constitution was almost verbatim taken over by the East-Germans, including all the high-sounding proclamations of human rights, as was the flag⁷

Three politicians stand out in postwar Germany, all of them West-German politicians. Namely Adenauer, Brandt and Kohl. Adenauer was the founding father, and his lasting achievement was to secure for the West-Germans a true political independence (slowly but steadily he opposed all attempts of the western occupying powers to make out of the state a second-order one, without any true sovereignty) as well, as noted above, opposing a unified neutral Germany. It is as tempting as it is vain to indulge in contrafactual speculation, yet any reflection of history requires it, as well as any ambition of judgement becomes moot, without it. In retrospect it is thus safe to say, as noted above, that the route laid out by Adenauer was probably the most felicitous one. A neutral unified Germany would have been viewed with much more suspicion and suffered much more restriction than a divided one as already noted. The path of the far more peripheral Austria was not an option. The division of Germany meant in effect that it made common interests with its respective camps, who were thus more willing to support it. The two Germanies became the stage on which the two ideologies could fight it out with proxies. And the West-Germans clearly got the better deal, something that was recognised by the Soviets from early on, and made

⁴ Much has been made of Adenauer being from the Rhineland, an obscure mayor of Cologne for most of his pre-war career; and thus being distrustful of the Prussian east.

⁵ Whose fortieth anniversary would be celebrated as it was about to enter its death-throes.

⁶ West-Germany automatically considered the citizens of East-Germany automatically as citizens of the West, a pledge always honored to successful refugees

⁷ The East-German flag would only later differ, by the addition of the symbol of the compass. The basic flag itself was taken from the failed revolution of 1848.

them eager to deal with the western part over the heads of their eastern protectorate⁸. Because as Palmerstone famously remarked, a country does not have friends, only interests. In 1955 diplomatic connections were established between West-Germany and the Soviet-Union, further showing the success of Adenauer's West-Politik⁹. A West-Politik that was eventually also adopted by the West-German Social-Democrats, enabling them to once again, for the first time in the Postwar years, to get back into the lime-light, and thus preparing for the next stage of West-German politics, namely the era of Brandt. Brandt, also with an impeccable war-record, and a far more flamboyant and charismatic political personality than the previous west-German leaders, came into national prominence as the mayor of Berlin during the critical years in the early sixties. As such he identified himself and his party with the Western alliance and NATO membership, which enabled him to initiate the Ost-Politik, which essentially was simply acknowledging the realities of the split. Until the early 70's, West-Germany had refused to recognise any country that recognised DDR, with the significant exception of the USSR¹⁰. The result of this was a political isolation of the BRD, which, as its economic muscle had increased, became a liability. By making overtures to DDR, the Bundesrepublik was able both to play a decisive role in Eastern Europe by allowing its economical power to influence, not to say manipulate, the various countries. Ost-Politik became in essence West-Politik, but by other means. Ost-Politik also played an important role in defusing the Cold-War and lead to a temporary thaw in the 70's known as detente. The 70's was also a period of fashionable leftist excess, once again mostly of rhetorical nature, and hence leaving almost no imprint on the deeper political developments¹¹. With the eighties, the revival of the Cold War, had once again the effect of pitting the two Germanies against each other, but as noted above, their common experiences as hostages, the belligerence of Cold War rhetorics, had the paradoxical effect of making them more aware of their common heritage. And in particular the economic ties, which amounted to a West-German subsidy to DDR, made a definite break unpalatable to the ruling clique of the DDR. The Ost-Politik of Brandt was likewise, under the tutelage of Kohl¹², accepted by the CDU, and further pragmatically (some would say cynically) developed. Thus as the present book brings matters up to date, an eventual reunion, of whatever form, seems inevitable by the author. Yet, the author,

⁸ Once more showing that in politics you should pay less attention to rhetorics than acts, which is obscured by the conventions of day-to-day political journalism.

⁹ There is a cleft between politics, as it is really pursued and as it is presented to the electorate. The latter is by necessity a simplification and vulgarization, involving not a little amount of wilful obfuscation and deception, and thus a politician should once again not be judged by his rhetorics but by his achievement. And Adenauer had a vision and a strategy, which was relentlessly pursued, and only in retrospect accurately judged. This double-play constitute one of the paradoxes, not to say contradiction, of democracy.

¹⁰ Showing that interests always take precedence over principles

¹¹ The exception was of course the militant Red-Army fraction, playing the role of a terrorist group, and as such being almost indistinguishable from a purely criminal one. As it affected nothing, its provocation coming to nothing, it did not grow out of its ambivalent past into an effective political force, but simply got extinguished and in the end thus hardly deserving even a footnote.

¹² Coming to power by a parliamentary vote of no-confidence. A scheme that for the first time worked in the short history of the Federal Republic

and no one else for that matter, would in 1987 have foreseen what would happen in just two years. Yet, in retrospect one suspects that the train of events that would be unleashed was less surprising to the leading politicians than to the populace at large. It did provide Kohl with his one opportunity, to which he commendably rose; providing a reunification, almost as a *volte-en-face*, yet never during the forty years of formal split had that possibility been permanently rejected. Once again, West-German economical power made the whole thing possible, the Soviets were bought out, and the East-Germans were unceremoniously transferred, ostensibly by their own choice, to the Western fold. Adenauer's strategy in the end bearing fruit.

The history of West-Germany lacked any drama. The same can be said for the history of East-Germany, with a few exceptions. Its political beginnings were strange. At an early stage political parties were legalized and formed in DDR ostensibly spanning a fairly wide spectrum. But the Soviets realised that direct appeals to the electorate would be a dangerous thing, as the case of Austria had shown, so the SPD was asked to join the Communist party (as well as severing its ties with its western branch) into SED (the Socialist Unity party), while the other, supposedly independent political parties, actually formed from above, in order to exempt grassroot initiatives, were to fill the roles as supporting parties¹³ Thus, while the constitution of the DDR was impeccably Democratic, its actual implementation was not. The country was run by the German Communist Ulbricht, a zealot who had spent time in Moscow during the war, and could be counted on to serve the interests of the occupying power loyally, if at times too zealously¹⁴. The first conflict was the spontaneous uprising of workers in Berlin on June 17 1953. It simply highlighted the contradiction there is in equating the interests of the workers with that of employers, a necessary consequence of the rhetorics of a state of workers and peasants taken literally. The uprising was indeed sporadic, it had no leaders, no agenda, and did get no support from the West. It may have scared the regime, if only temporarily, just as it temporarily did inspire Brecht to write some sarcastic lines¹⁵. The author speculates that prior to the Berlin uprising, the USSR, sensing DDR as a liability, had been willing to sacrifice it¹⁶, on the condition of a neutral unified Germany, but that the crisis made such a realistic concession, appear ideologically impossible. DDR did persevere for many more years to present the idea of a neutral unified Germany, but unbacked by any concrete underpin-

¹³ Membership in those other parties were encouraged, and their leaders enjoyed similar privileges as the party elites of the SED, contingent upon the tacit agreement of political impotence.

¹⁴ The Soviet authorities sometimes thought that the East-German regime was too harsh, being in power they could resort to common sense, while that was not an option to Ulbricht and his cohorts, who had to constantly prove their enthusiastic loyalty. When Ulbricht was phased out at the end of the sixties, he was made a complete irrelevance, and at his death shortly thereafter, a state funeral was only reluctantly agreed on several weeks afterwards.

¹⁵ About the Government electing another people, if it was not satisfied with it

¹⁶ Beria, who as a ruthless KGB man, and as a result of having been ousted by Chrustjov, has had a very bad press. This might have been appropriate on a personal level, but in retrospect not on a political. Beria may have proved to be an economic liberal, maybe even to some extent a political as well, and would in power may have brought about a Gorbachov development thirty years earlier. Yet, counterfactual speculation, fascinating as it may be, should always be taken with more than just a grain or two of salt.

nings, and hence ignored by the West as a mere rhetorical routine. More seriously, the economic divergence between the two Germanies was already apparent in the early fifties, and would only widen with the years. The reasons for that were not hard to discern, and they were only partially of ideological nature. West-Germany was the most industrialized part of the former German Reich. In postwar years it received generous economic assistance from the West, while the Soviets, at least initially was focused on repartitions instead, carrying off large parts of the East-German industrial infra-structure. Then followed a forceful collectivization of agriculture, of course not as harsh and punishing as that Stalin had enforced twenty years earlier, but nevertheless counter-productive, as well as a forced industrialization focused on heavy industry, paying scant attention to consumer-goods¹⁷ the consequence was that East-Germans voted by their feet, and while, with the exception of the stray intellectual, no one from the West fled to the East, while literally millions of East-Germans left for the West, mostly through West-Berlin. East-Germany was being let at an alarming rate, losing a substantial proportion of its population, and the most vigorous to boot. The situation was just untenable, and the Berlin Wall was a foregone conclusion, whose erection led to a stabilization, and thus secretly blessed by the Western powers. Divergence would continue, yet East-Germany in spite of everything would progress economically at a respectable rate. Yet the divergence could never be kept a secret, communication between the two countries being inevitable, through ties of blood and friendship, as well as media. Attempts at separation, were nevertheless vigilantly pursued, resulting in the spectacle of Stasi, with everybody spying on everybody else, producing such a mass of information, most of it undigested and plain false and misleading as well, as making any intelligent processing impossible. Thus what ensued was a police-state with a level of surveillance, exceeding anything precedent; but also a State which may have infused daily life with terror and paralysis, but not with a proportionate amount of violence and death. An overt act of defiance, like an attempt at escape through a mine-field might most likely involve death; yet any other dissention would more likely involve expulsion or re-education, than death or life-time imprisonment. With time the harshness and greyness of East-German life were eased. Restrictions on family reunions were gradually softened, and as usual corruption breeds tolerance. It is very sobering to compare the divided history of Germany with that of Korea.

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¹⁷ This was universal in the Soviet-bloc, reflecting less an ideological bias, as a determination of catching up.