

## **GERMANY: THE UNRULY GIANT**

*David Gow*

### **SELF DOUBT AND SELF ASSERTION**

Germany Europe's biggest and, arguably, most powerful nation has just entered a fateful year. Three turbulent years since unification on October 3 1990 have failed to settle the new 'German question'; how to prevent the country at the centre of the European continent, with the largest number of borders, from turning into a footloose cannon dangerously primed to go off and provoke another, more threatening era of instability between the old West and the new East.

Unification, a marvellous moment of post-war European history, has radically altered the continent's map and produced, in turn, deep-seated changes in both parts of the country that even now are only dimly perceived by its politicians, let alone by their voters. The delayed cyclical and structural recession in the west and the painful process of transformation from a planned to a social market economy in the east have led to real-term levels of unemployment of six million that are unprecedented since the pre-Hitler era.

This year sees no less than 18 separate elections - local, regional, national and European - that culminate in a general election in late October whose outcome is more difficult to predict than at virtually any other period since the foundation of the federal republic in 1949. While German fears of a return to the instability of the Weimar Republic between 1918 and 1933 are grossly exaggerated, growing secularisation, huge sociological change, the disintegration of traditional party loyalties and voter disenchantment (*Verdrossenheit*) are among key factors hastening the introduction of 'Italian-style relations' into German political life.

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*David Gow is Bonn correspondent of **The Guardian**.*

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Germany is almost certainly en route from a three-party system, dominated by the two 'people's parties', the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD), which governed in turn with the smaller Liberal Free Democrats (FDP), to a more unstable constellation. The Greens, now merged with the remnants of the old East German civil rights movement in Alliance '90, will presumably cross the Rubicon from 'party of protest' to 'party of proposal' (in Sara Parkin's terminology) and re-enter the Bundestag or lower house of parliament in substantial numbers. They now command around 10% in opinion polls.

To their left, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the reformed rump of the East German Communist Party (SED), has excellent chances of securing seats - most likely, under Germany's complex proportional representation voting system, through three direct mandates. It is questionable though not to be excluded that it will have an even stronger presence by surmounting the 5% (of national votes) hurdle. Even more questionable is whether the far-right Republicans will gain more than the 5% nationally and enter the Bundestag for the first time.

The outcome, whatever it is, could be a five-or six-party system which renders coalition arithmetic extremely precarious or simply produces the grand coalition of CDU and SPD that voters appear to favour but would probably detest. This would equally spell the probable demise of Helmut Kohl as Chancellor after 12 years in office whose high-point was the 'annus mirabilis' of 1989-90.

Kohl is likely to be forced to quit because he failed to provide the political answers to that over-arching question of post-unification German identity. Margaret, Lady Thatcher found an astonishing resonance even in Germany when, in her memoirs of last autumn, she talked of an unsettled country swaying perennially between self-doubt and self-assertion. But her further remarks of a Germany seeking dominance over a Europe it wanted to fashion after its own interests were wide of the mark. And the comments of Theodoros Pangalos, Greek deputy foreign minister, in late November that Germany was 'a giant with bestial force and a child's brain' were simply preposterous.

It is my contention in this article that widespread fears of an over-mighty, self-seeking yet unstable Germany holding the rest of Europe under its thrall are unfounded. That, despite the evidence of pathological forms of neo-Nazism and overt reversion to notions of nation-statehood, Germany remains a democratic, tolerant and secure country whose overwhelming interests lie in

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an integrated Europe. But that its fate rests equally upon sympathetic and sensitive treatment by its neighbours and partners as it struggles to define its place and role, above all its identity, in a profoundly unsettled world.

#### **A EUROPEAN COUNTER-REVOLUTION**

Three events on Thursday, November 25 1993 may well make that day a turning-point in post-war German history almost as significant as the fall of the Berlin Wall four years earlier or state unification a year after. The first - which was virtually unnoticed by the domestic media - was John Major's visit to Bonn for a day of talks with Chancellor Helmut Kohl. This meeting quite clearly put the seal on a year-long effort to restore relations between Britain and Germany after the angry acrimony unleashed by Black September's monetary crisis and the humiliating withdrawal of Sterling from the European monetary system.

The two leaders agreed that supply-side measures such as deregulation, sound money, cuts in public spending and a flexible labour market - low-wage jobs in the service sector - as well as freer world trade were pre-conditions for restored growth and employment in a European Union facing 20 million jobless in 1994. These policies were essential to improve Europe's competitiveness against the stronger challenges emanating from North America and the Asian/Pacific region. The UK premier even admitted that, without co-ordinated measures, Europe faced the inevitability of relative economic decline against both.

Both Major and Kohl, in their different ways, are, moreover, at the head of a counter-revolution in Europe, the so-called Back to Basics campaign. This aims at no less than the overthrow of the post-1968 complex of values, supposedly based on boundless me-too-ism, and the creation of a cultural hegemony of the right, founded on the restoration of traditional values of family life, hard work, voluntary community service and, above all, patriotism.

But, as the second of the day's symbolically important events underlined, this project is far more problematic in newly-united Germany than in the Disunited Kingdom. Kohl, weary, preoccupied, had learned the previous day that his chosen candidate to succeed Richard von Weizsäcker as federal president, Steffen Heitmann, an arch-conservative east German, had definitively stood down. This meant the collapse of his personal project of promoting neo-conservative values and of regaining political popularity in

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the east through Heitmann, Saxony's justice minister. Kohl and Heitmann, as we shall see, failed because the Chancellor fatally misjudged the mood in both east and west Germany where 81 million citizens are unprepared after four years of convulsive overthrow of habits of thinking and living for his strategy of 'new stability through comprehensive change'. This demonstration of Kohl's personal hubris could signal the political demise of the Chancellor of Unity and the man who has dominated his country and Europe for more than a decade.

One of the reasons why Kohl faces such a difficult task was revealed by the third notable event of the day. Some 200 miles away, in Hanover, Volkswagen, Europe's biggest car-maker, and IG Metall, the giant engineering union with 3.25 million members, unveiled a deal to combat unemployment and cut costs that ran directly counter to the Kohl/Major strategy. The agreement to introduce a 4-day week in 1994 and 1995, thereby 'saving' 30,000 jobs and/or retaining a third of the company's German workforce, was a striking example of the old-fashioned, corporatist mentality in the country's industry that had lain behind its economic miracle and had proven itself once more flexible enough to adapt to gradual change. It reasserted the continuing strength of 'social peace' in the midst of west Germany's worst post-war recession.

### **GERMANY, EUROPE AND THE WORLD**

'Our future does not lie in the east: the east's future lies in the west', according to Karl Lamers, CDU foreign policy spokesman, in August 1992. 'Germany wants to be a nation-state again, but an honest and critical discussion about its roots, its past and its future role in a unifying Europe is lacking' (Mathiopoulos 1993, p.74).

These two comments reflect a wide-ranging debate about the new Germany's role that has set in during recent months. In the three decades after the Treaty of Rome, the West Germany fashioned above all by Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl saw its interests and identity in the western Europe of the European Community (now European Union) and in the Atlantic Alliance. Its interests, predominantly, were determined by Washington, Paris and London; its citizens may have defined themselves as West Germans but its civil society sought refuge from deeper investigation of identity under a European or even global mantle.

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Typical of this mentality is the response of Patrick Süskind, the novelist, and other left-leaning intellectuals to the fall of the Wall: they (the Ossis or East Germans) were alien members of a foreign country that had little or nothing in common with cultural soul-mates in Tuscany, Catalonia or Provence. By 1993, under the real impact of east Germany's voluntary annexation, vestiges of this attitude remained but had been largely superseded by a self-critical search for a new identity.

Mathiopoulos, of Greek origins and brought up in Bonn, is an exemplary case of this soul-searching. Rejected by the SPD leadership in 1987 as spokeswoman of Brandt in his role as party chairman, she is married to Friedbert Pflüger, CDU deputy and former von Weizsäcker spokesman who provoked the ugly wrath of his colleagues in the autumn of 1993 by denouncing Heitmann's candidacy.

Her essential plaidoyer is for a national identity based upon 'constitutional patriotism' or the republican, universalist values enshrined in the 1949 Basic Law which east Germans also adopted in 1990. It is a sense of belonging, if at all, that views the Nazi period and the Holocaust as an inescapable, unforgettable part of German history that has to be constantly remembered and worked upon to prevent its re-enactment in another form. Every scrap of evidence that Germany, 'difficult Fatherland', is reverting to nationalism is adduced to reaffirm the enduring value of a Bonn Republic that definitively died in October 1990.

It's an attitude shared by many of her post-war generation. Rudolf Scharping, the new SPD leader and Kohl's possible successor, told this correspondent that the only German patriotism he could countenance was a constitutional patriotism subsumed under a commitment to European integration. His party, deeply imbued with the post-Hitler tradition of pacifism, embraces a modest view of German power that precludes (temporarily at least) overseas military missions other than in the most restricted guise. The Greens reject even this.

Similarly, Micha Brumlik, professor of education at Heidelberg and regular columnist of the alternative **Taz** daily, scathingly answers his own question whether Germans have the right to be patriots with a damning quotation from the Polish writer, Andre Szczypiorski (Brumlik 1993). 'The German people has inscribed the mark of Cain on Europe, it has abjured itself, denied its own history and, together with the Jews of Europe, burned Lessing and Kleist, Goethe and Bach, in the gas-chambers and -ovens, it has burned and gassed its own German spiritual identity'.

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There are those intellectuals on the left, like the novelist Martin Walser, who argue highly controversially that the lack of patriotism is one reason for the rise of violent neo-Nazism among disaffected young people who taunt with Hitlerite symbols they do not even understand. But Hans-Joachim Veen, head of political research at the CDU's Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, insists that these predominantly young men are marked by the fear of being the losers in a process of rapid economic and social change, and are politically unmotivated. (Veen 1993).

The very violence with which they chant 'We are Somebody Again' (Wir sind wieder wer) does give credence to the thesis that they are the victims of pathological phenomena in modern societies such as brutalisation, family-break down and alienation, and are desperately asserting German-ness as a cover for their own personal inadequacy. But Veen, like others, underestimates the degree to which fringe leaders have combined - notably since the government ban on five groups last year - to steer attacks on foreigners, Jews and homosexuals centrally. And the domestic intelligence service certainly underestimates the numbers involved (7,000 in its 1992 report).

The impossibility of German patriotism was challenged by Heitmann and, through him, Kohl, the CDU and its Bavarian sister, the Christian Social Union (not forgetting the Republicans and other right-wing groupuscules that supported him). Heitmann, indirectly orphaned by the UK/US firebombing of Dresden in February 1945, was/is an east German imprisoned by his own past as an unheroic (his own word) resister to Soviet-imposed communism who simply had/has no comprehension of the cultural hegemony prevailing in the west.

His project, heavily criticised and, partially at least, traduced by the liberal-left media establishment of the west, was to free both parts of Germany from the shackles of their dark past and make of a united country a 'normal state'. That is a strategy pursued with differing forms of eagerness by mainstream politicians as diverse as Klaus Kinkel, FDP leader and foreign minister, Volker R  he, ex-CDU general secretary and defence minister, Lamers and Kohl. Its ultimate goal is a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council for a Germany finally prepared to commit its troops to every conceivable kind of overseas military mission - that is, peace-making as well as peace-keeping or humanitarian action, under the UN, Nato or Western European Union umbrella.

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But Heitmann, deeply conscious of living in a new, unsettled republic at war with itself, sought to define its values in a manner that shook the fundamentals of the engrained western identity. Family, church, national pride, the 're-ordering' of Germany's past in its proper place, in essence a peculiar German form of Poujadisme, were the hallmarks of his project. It resulted in incomprehensible views (such as - in a background chat with a dozen foreign correspondents in Bonn in mid-October - that abortion-on-demand was inextricably linked with neo-Nazi violence!).

The failure of his candidacy, however, testified to a more profound dilemma for all Germans. Heitmann defined himself (to this correspondent) as a Middle European while the overwhelming bulk of his fellow-citizens, including now in the five new eastern federal states, see themselves as West Europeans. Willy nilly, they feel threatened by or anxious about the low-wage economies to their east and south-east, whose own citizens continue to flock across German borders, and by a growth in immigrants in 1992 alone of one million.

This unease is reflected at the highest political level. Lamers, a perspicacious strategist, is more and more convinced that his country's interests demand more Europe, not less. In his August paper and subsequently he has tried to define that Europe as a reformed EU, more deeply integrated in monetary, foreign and security policies, but open to membership from the east - and playing the key role in ensuring economic and political stability in Russia. Similar policy papers on extending Nato eastwards without offending Russian strategic interests underline Germany's growing function as a bridge between western and eastern Europe.

Kohl, too, has made plain in countless speeches that he sees his historic role in warding off the ugly rebirth of nationalism, especially German nationalism, by so 'embedding' his nation in pan-European structures it will be impossible to escape. It may be hard for a Scottish or British audience to comprehend, but he and his aides genuinely see him as the last bulwark against nationalism - a passionate European in his heart, mind and belly whose successor will not share the same commitment.

That his views are no longer as widely held as they were is shown by the resonance attracted by Edmund Stoiber, Bavarian premier, whom **Die Zeit**, the Hamburg-based liberal weekly, renamed Edmund Thatcher. He has urged a slowing-down of the process of 'deepening' the EU and the abandonment of the notions of a united, federal Europe championed by Adenauer and his spiritual grandson, Kohl.

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Stoiber, an intelligent hard-liner, is partly pleading against creating a 'Fortress Europe (West)' to the detriment of the reform-states to its east, notably Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. But he is also asserting the interests of the 16 German federal states, particularly Free State Bavaria, against Bonn/Berlin and Brussels. And, in doing so, he had touched upon a raw nerve in the unproven constitutional settlement over the respective powers of the federal and state governments and of the federal parliament in determining Euro-policy.

#### **GERMANY AT THE CROSS-ROADS: A MARATHON ELECTION YEAR**

Stoiber's Bavaria, one of the main gainers of the west German economic miracle, feels marginalised by the process of deepening and widening Europe. Rather than merely asserting a new form of German nationalism, he is, above all, playing up Bavarian particularism, a view shared in other federal states with nuanced overtones. Unification has placed enormous financial and political strains on Germany's federal structure, and an overdue reshaping, postponed in 1990, may finally have to take place for budgetary reasons alone.

But, of course, Stoiber is also trying to defend the CSU's power-base in Bavaria itself, primarily against inroads from the Republicans. Still led by Franz Schönhuber, the 70-year-old ex-Waffen SS officer, this right-wing populist party (as Veen (1993) characterises it) has won up to nearly 11% of the poll at recent regional elections and gained 7.1% in the 1989 Euro-elections. It polled well then in Bavaria where Stoiber's CSU needs 43% under Germany's voting system to remain in the European Parliament at all.

Now scrupulously promoting a clean image as a party of caring patriots, while unscrupulously exploiting fears of foreigners and Jews in the shortage of jobs and homes, the Republicans have no political or economic programme. At their congress in early November in Rastatt they agreed on a Euro-manifesto based on opposition to the Maastricht treaty and abolition of the Mark - and the European-wide promotion of modern sewerage systems...

Their voting strength has been consistently under-estimated in the run-up to elections, but recent polls show them hovering at or below the critical 5% mark - and a popular revulsion against them and, even more, outright neo-Nazis. (The polling organisation Allensbach found 77% of Germans would hate living next-door to a right-wing extremist but only 7% disliking the prospect of a Jewish neighbour.) But clearly they have tapped, especially

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among former SPD and CDU voters, a deep well of resentment both at mainstream politicians' failure to address problems, let alone solve them, and at the personal effects of this failure.

At a deeper level, their relative success and the emergence of new, often local, groupuscules outside the traditional mainstream - such as the 'Instead Party' of disenchanted, floating middle-class voters in Hamburg - testifies to a crisis in the post-war party system. Whereas in the 1970s CDU and SPD, drawing on core voters, could muster together 90%, they commanded only 77% in 1990 and are likely to get little more than 70% this year. Even the FDP, members of the two ruling coalitions since 1969, could disappear from the Bundestag under the weight of Kinkel's poor leadership and dramatic changes in the socio-political landscape.

Germany, then, approaches this election marathon in a surly insecure mood. With economic recovery set for, at earliest, later this year, the prospect of four million jobless (officially), record levels of crime, unprecedented levels of public borrowing (£100 billion), higher direct and indirect taxes, firms transferring production abroad or savagely cutting costs and jobs at home, the country's penchant for making a drama out of a crisis will be in full flood.

But it has embarked upon a unique adventure in post-war Europe - the creation of a new, united republic formed of two opposing cultures and systems and committed to democratic values - when it is locked in a series of inter-locking crises. The golden, comfortable days of the 1980s have gone for the Wessis and the promised splendours of the 1990s have failed to come yet for the Ossis. Yet. (The signs of vigorous renewal are very visible among the heaps of decay.)

The post-Wall convulsions in both east and west - the radical change in the world-wide division of labour, redefinitions of the relations between state and society, a continent seeking to coalesce to confront the challenges of North and South - are experienced more strongly in Germany than in any other European country. This requires tact and patience, both on its part and on ours, as the country slowly, confusedly and insecurely grasps for a new identity. To shout out loud at German hegemony will be to create the very thing we most do fear.

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