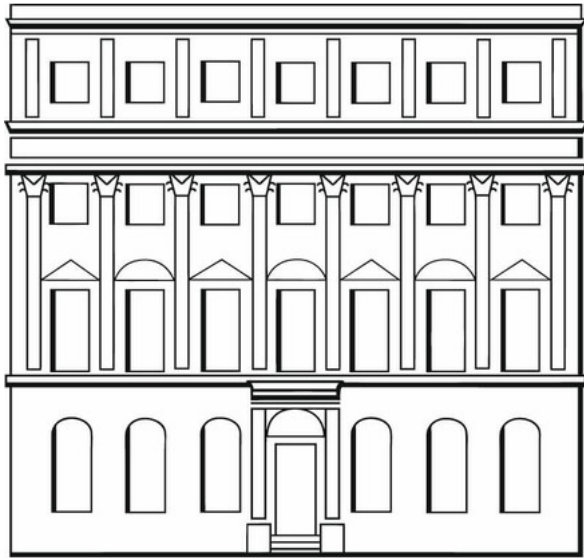


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Since this lecture was held, Heinrich August Winkler has gone on to publish the following works:

An English translation of *Der lange Weg nach Westen* entitled *Germany: The Long Road West*, trans. Alexander J. Sager, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2006–7).

Geschichte des Westens, 4 vols. (Munich, 2009–15), along with its single-volume summary *Werte und Mächte: Eine Geschichte der westlichen Welt* (Munich, 2019). Volume two of *Geschichte des Westens* has been translated into English as *The Age of Catastrophe: A History of the West*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, 2019)

Zerreiproben: Deutschland, Europa und der Westen. Interventionen 1990–2015 (Munich, 2015)

Zerbricht der Westen? ber die gegenwrtige Krise in Europa und Amerika (Munich, 2017)

Wie wir wurden, was wir sind: Eine kurze Geschichte der Deutschen (Munich, 2020)

Deutungskmpfe: Der Streit um die deutsche Geschichte (Munich, 2021)

Nationalstaat wider Willen: Interventionen zur deutschen und europischen Politik (Munich, 2022).

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THE 2001 ANNUAL LECTURE

The Long Shadow of the Reich
Weighing Up
German History

by

Heinrich August Winkler

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You will all, no doubt, have heard of the famous and much-debated German *Sonderweg* (Germany's supposedly abnormal development) — but did it really exist? If asked this question today the majority of historians would probably say 'no'. Nothing is normal in history. All history is the history of *Sonderwege*. So it makes no sense to talk of a German *Sonderweg*.

But had the question been asked three decades ago the answer would have been quite different. In the 1970s the thesis of the German *Sonderweg*, or German deviation from the West, had become the national master narrative of the old Federal Republic. At least it was the social-liberal way of interpreting recent German history. In a nutshell, the thesis is this: the German catastrophe between 1933 and 1945 was no 'industrial accident' of German history. The real reason why Hitler came to power was the longevity of the German authoritarian state. Unlike the great western democracies — so the thesis goes — Germany had not liberated itself from its absolutist and feudal past by means of revolution. Pre-industrial elites like the Prussian Junkers were therefore able to remain socially powerful until well into the 20th century. The German bourgeoisie, on the other hand, suffered the reverse effect, its development distorted by the authority of the state. Democratic and liberal traditions were not as strong as in England, France or the United States. This is the main reason why the old democracies of the West were able to salvage their political systems from the world economic crisis, while the young Weimar democracy caved in to National Socialism after 1930.

The thesis I have just described has, of course, some fairly obvious shortcomings. Firstly, various supporters of the *Sonderweg* thesis (and indeed others too) have established with some regret that there was no

successful German revolution, but they have offered no historical explanation for this. Secondly, critics of the Kaiserreich, the *Sonderweg* historians' preferred object of examination, like to present it purely as an authoritarian state – but it was more than that. It was a contradictory structure that was also part of the history of German democracy. Thirdly, concentrating on the Reich founded by Bismarck led to a foreshortening of the historical horizons. Thus by the end of the 20th century the discussion about the German *Sonderweg* had fallen well behind the level of knowledge of German emigrants and Anglo-Saxon historians who, both before and after 1945, had gone much further back into history in order to discover what was really 'peculiar' about German history, and what made it different from the history of the democratic nations of the West.

This question is still important — much more important than whether the peculiarities of German history can or cannot be bundled together in the concept of the German *Sonderweg*. I can sum up my point of departure here in one sentence: In the beginning was the Reich. This is where all the differences between German history and the history of the great nations of western Europe start. In the Middle Ages there was a parting of the ways. At that time national states began to emerge in England and France, while in Germany the modern state developed at a lower level, that of the princely territorial state. At the same time another edifice continued to exist, which saw itself as more than just one kingdom among others — the Holy Roman Empire. The fact that Germany became a national state later than England and France, and even later still a democracy, cannot be explained without the Holy Roman Empire and the tradition of empire.

The Reich is the first of three essentials that left their mark on German history over many centuries. The second is the religious schism in the 16th century, which was crucial in making Germany into the arena for a thirty-year European war in the century that followed. The third is the conflict between Prussia and Austria, which, in the second half of the 18th century, made the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation seem to many to be little more than an empty shell.

When the Old Reich was dissolved in 1806 under the pressure of Napoleon's ultimatum, many people perceived this as little more than a formality. But the Reich left something behind that was as old as the Reich itself: its myth. According to the medieval myth of the 'translatio imperii', the Roman Empire did not come to an end, but was transferred to the Germans when Charlemagne was crowned in the year 800. As long as that Reich — since the mid-12th century called 'sacrum imperium' — continued to exist, then the Anti-Christ would not come to power. This is how the Reich theologians of the Middle Ages put it.

According to the Revelation of St John, the Anti-Christ was a tyrant and a false prophet. The medieval gloss on this was that he was also the leader of heretics and a Jew. New Testament prophecy claimed that the rule of the Anti-Christ would mean the end of world history. But there was a force that could hold back the rule of the Anti-Christ: the *Katechon* (the 'restrainer'), which Bible-experts knew about from Paul's (supposed) second letter to the Thessalonians. This *Katechon* was the Reich — and this is the core of the medieval Reich myth. It was this myth which nurtured the belief that the Germans had some sort of special mission to save the world. They saw themselves as charged with a universal task, and therefore as the natural leaders of

the Christian occident. This myth survived the demise of the Roman Empire. In the 20th century it was to experience a renaissance with devastating consequences.

In the early 19th century the dream of German greatness took on a different form. In his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* of 1808 Fichte pronounced the Germans to be the spiritual leaders of the world. Five years later he called for a German national state ruled by a 'Zwingherr zur Deutschheit', the King of Prussia. The wars of liberation against Napoleon did not bring the Germans what the founding fathers of German nationalism — Fichte, 'Turnvater' Jahn and the publicist Ernst Moritz Arndt — were striving for: unity and freedom. This dual goal did not come back on to the agenda until the revolution of 1848. It was a programme that was to over-tax German liberals and democrats. They had set themselves an even more ambitious task than the French revolutionaries of 1789, who at least *had* a national state which they sought to change from a feudal and absolutist state into a constitutional citizens' state. But in Germany a national state and a constitutional state had to be created simultaneously, and before that the question of what 'Germany' was in terms of territory had to be sorted out.

In the spring of 1848 the German liberals, democrats and socialists could only envisage Germany as 'Großdeutschland' or 'greater Germany' — a Reich that included Austria, and indeed Austria as it had belonged to the German Confederation within the boundaries of 1815 — in other words, not just the German-speaking parts of the Habsburg monarchy, but also Trient and Trieste and, if possible, Bohemia and Moravia. It is extremely unlikely that the rest of Europe would have accepted such an enormous Reich

and with it German hegemony over the Continent. But in any case the great power Austria could not consent to her territory being broken up, which would have been a result of a greater-German national state. In spring 1849, when the majority in the German National Assembly finally realised that the German question could not be solved in a way that included Austria, in other words the greater-German solution, it was already too late for the alternative, the lesser-German version under the leadership of the other German great power, Prussia. For the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV, had no intention of becoming German Emperor by the grace of the people, thereby running the risk of war with Austria and Russia.

As far as the resolute Left were concerned a war with Tsarist Russia was nothing to be afraid of. On the contrary: in their view the revolution could only succeed if the vanguard of the counter-revolution were annihilated. Bourgeois radicals like Karl Vogt and Arnold Ruge were in agreement on this point with the socialists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, although these two naturally went even further and proclaimed a 'world war' for the year 1849.

For the moderates this was a totally disastrous policy that could easily lead to another Thirty Years' War. In 1848, two centuries after the Peace of Westphalia, memory of that original German catastrophe was ever-present. As far as the moderates were concerned it was not just a memory, but also a portent. In September 1849 Gustav Rümelin, a former Deputy to the Frankfurt Paulskirche parliament from Württemberg, was still warning Prussia against forcing through the lesser-German solution in open confrontation with Austria. If Prussia did not heed this warning, he wrote, '... there is a threat of conflict

between North and South Germany, a civil war, which, like the Thirty Years' War, will summon foreign armies over our border and make Germany once again into the battlefield of Europe'.¹ Anyone looking for deep-seated reasons for the failure of the 1848/49 revolution will find them here: in this fear that a period of terror might return, the terror experienced by Germany during the Thirty Years' War.

There was another German experience that still made itself felt in 1848/49: that of enlightened absolutism. In 1948, a hundred years after the revolution, the historian Rudolf Stadelmann published an essay entitled 'Deutschland und die westeuropäischen Revolutionen'. He gave a deliberately paradoxical answer to the question of why there was no successful revolution in Germany: 'It was not the forces of reaction, but those of progress that made Germany fall behind the West'. And he explained this verdict as follows: 'Only the idea of revolution from above and the practice of the enlightened administrative state, only the image of rulers whose reputation, far beyond the boundaries of their own state, was that of friends of the people, especially the lowly people, only this was strong enough to compete with the declaration of human rights. The ideal of the revolution from above gave the German the feeling that he had no need of foreign imports to keep his house in order'.²

Fifteen years after the 1848 revolution, at the height of the Prussian constitutional conflict, Napoleon III felt compelled to warn Bismarck about a new revolution. The Prussian Minister President replied: 'In Prussia only kings start revolutions'.³ The way in which Bismarck solved the German question a short time later *was* a revolution from above. He satisfied one of the demands of 1848, the desire for unity, and

indeed in the lesser-German sense, without and against Austria — a solution far more acceptable to the rest of Europe than any sort of greater-German version. But the question of freedom, in the sense of introducing a government responsible to parliament as envisaged by the liberals, Bismarck did not solve. This would have been quite impossible without clashing with the vital interests of the House of Hohenzollern and the other German princes. These interests required strong executive powers in the Reich and in the individual states. Had the Reichstag gained political predominance, this would have meant a posthumous victory for the Revolution of 1848, which was precisely what the revolution from above was supposed to prevent.

In many respects the Reich founded by Bismarck was a military and authoritarian state. But this was not the whole story. The Reichstag was elected according to the most progressive electoral law of its time: all men aged 25 or over had an equal right to vote directly and in secret. Where electoral law was concerned the German Reich was far ahead of the liberal monarchies of the late 19th century, Britain and Belgium in particular. It was more democratic than they were. And this now brings us to a specific contradiction in the process of Germany's political modernisation, a contradiction with very serious consequences — the fact that electoral law became democratic at an early stage and the system of government at a late one. It was not until October 1918, after military defeat in the First World War, that a government responsible to parliament was finally installed in Germany. Introducing democracy to the Reich was supposed to make the victorious western powers look favourably

on Germany and prevent a revolution from below. As we know, neither of these expectations was fulfilled.

The German revolution of 1918/19 was not one of the great or classic revolutions in world history — not least because of that contradiction in Germany's political modernisation I have just been talking about. After the First World War Germany was too far developed for a policy of *tabula rasa*. In a country that had already had universal and equal male suffrage for a good fifty years, it could only be a question of *more* democracy: female suffrage, a more democratic electoral system in the individual states, districts and communities, the full implementation of the parliamentary system. The call for early elections to a constituent National Assembly followed the logic of previous political developments. Only a small minority were calling for a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and their logic was entirely different: it was the logic of the revolutionary class struggle.

This minority, the extreme Left, openly embraced civil war, relying on the support of the Russian Bolsheviks. The moderate forces, led by the Majority Social Democrats, who had granted the Reich war credits to the last, knew that a German civil war could not remain a purely German conflict, but would immediately involve the Allies too. As it was for the Liberals in 1848, so now for the Social Democrats seventy years later — civil war was the greatest disaster imaginable. In 1848 fear of civil war had helped to bring the liberal bourgeoisie and the old forces closer together. In 1918 the Majority Social Democrats, the moderate bourgeois parties and the Army High Command formed an alliance against civil war. The result of this collaboration was the Weimar Republic — the first German democracy, which in the eyes of many

Germans always bore the national stigma of having emerged from the defeat of the Reich.

The fact that democracy was not introduced uniformly in Germany left its mark not only on the birth of the Weimar Republic, but also on its death. In the spring of 1930 the parliamentary system collapsed because the ruling parties were not sufficiently willing to compromise. The parliamentary majority government was replaced by a system of presidential emergency decrees, in which the Reichstag, as legislator, had even less of a voice than in the constitutional monarchy prior to 1918. But now it became clear that the wheels of history could not simply be turned back. When the Reichstag deprived itself of power and a semi-authoritarian regime was established, strongly influenced by the Reichswehr and the bureaucracy, this gave a boost to the anti-parliamentary forces on both Right and Left — though, it must be said, far more to the National Socialists than to the Communists.

Hitler's unique chance lay in the fact that from now on he could appeal to *in two directions*: to the widespread resentment about the failed parliamentary system, regarded by many Germans as the victors' system and therefore as 'un-German', and to the people's claim to political participation, attested since Bismarck's time in the form of universal suffrage, which the presidential cabinets had deprived of virtually all political relevance. Hitler did not come to power on 30 January 1933 as the result of an election victory, but his electoral successes between September 1930 and July 1932 were *one* precondition for his appointment as Reich Chancellor.

The *other* precondition was President von Hindenburg's decision to accept Hitler as head of a mainly conservative cabinet. Hindenburg embodied the core of power in the late Weimar Republic. Anyone

with access to him had a share of power. And no social group was closer to this power than the great land-owners of Old Prussia who had long-since been threatened with economic ruin. They had only managed to survive thanks to corn tariffs during the Reich and subsidies in the Weimar Republic. In January 1933 this socio-historical fact turned out to be a political issue of the first order.

Almost nine years after he came to power, during the night of 17/18 December 1941 in his *Wolfschanze* headquarters near Rastenburg, Hitler sought to fit the events of 1933 into their place in history: 'When we came to power', he said, 'the crucial issue for me was this: do we want to stick with the old calendar? Or should we take the new world order as a sign that a new calendar has started. I said to myself, the year 1933 is nothing less than the revival of a thousand-year-old condition. At that time the concept of the Reich had virtually been wiped out, but today it has proved itself victorious here and in the world: wherever people talk of Germany, they talk only of the Reich'.⁴

Hitler was exaggerating his own achievements. In educated circles in Germany the 'Reich' had already assumed new, even if only intellectual greatness before 1933. It was the response of right-wing intellectuals to Weimar and *both* Versailles, that of 1919 and that of 1871. In their view the 'Reich' was something higher than the republic. It was also more than Bismarck's Reich of 1871, which in 1919 had been humiliated and decimated by the Entente powers. It was more than a state among states. The 'Reich', as seen by the German Right in the early 1930s was, in its very essence, greater-German. According to the doctrine that prevailed from now on, Bismarck's lesser-German Reich was the only possible solution to the German question *at that time*,

but after the demise of the Habsburg monarchy, at the latest, the national state of 1871 was regarded as incomplete, and no longer the end of the story. The fall of that multinational state had removed the strongest argument against the greater-German solution and in favour of the lesser-German one. Since 1918 there had been two republics, both of which saw themselves as German, whose unification was opposed not by the people's right to self-determination, but by the will of the victorious powers.

A 'Greater Germany' would still have been a national state. But the supporters of the 'Reich concept' in the ranks of the German right, from the 'conservative revolution', via right-wing Catholicism, to the National Socialists, rejected the 'national state' because, like democracy, it was a western principle, an expression of the ideas of 1789. The concept of the 'national state' also had negative connotations because since 1918 there had been a new sovereign national state on Germany's eastern border — France's ally Poland. The concept of the 'Reich', on the other hand, embraced the notion of a supranational controlling power, which is what Germany felt called to become once more. 'Only a Europe led by Germany can be a Europe at peace', declared Wilhelm Stapel, editor of the young-conservative periodical *Deutsches Volkstum* in 1932.⁵

The 'idea of the Reich' — this invoked the greatness of the German Middle Ages and the mission that Germany took upon itself at that time on behalf of the whole of the Christian occident: to repel dangers from the heathen East. In the hearts and minds of its supporters, the 'idea of the Reich' had also survived all the humiliations to which Germany felt it had been subjected from the West, by France, for centuries: the Peace of Westphalia, the conquests by Louis XIV and

Napoleon, the Treaty of Versailles. The 'Reich' was the response to the ideas of 1789 and 1917, whereby 1917 stood for both Lenin *and* Wilson. There was only *one* 'Reich', the German one. It was the earthly reflection of the eternal, and thus the ultimate basis of the Germans' historic mission. As the Catholic publicist Waldemar Gurian, a critic of the new political romanticism, put it in 1932: 'The Reich is the solution to both domestic and foreign problems'. 'For the Reich – against Versailles and parliamentary democracy ... The Reich can be described as the German image of humanity, which stands in contrast to western humanitarianism, but is still different from eastern apocalypitics because of its ties with European history'.⁶

Of all the bridges between Hitler and educated circles in Germany the myth of the 'Reich' was certainly the most sturdy. On 10 February 1933, a few days after his appointment as Reich Chancellor, Hitler opened the Reichstag election campaign in the Berlin Palace of Sport. In an adaptation of the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer he embraced the 'new German Reich of greatness, and of power, and of glory and of justice'.⁷ In 1938, after the annexation of Austria, he had all the imperial insignia including crown, orb, sceptre and sword moved back from Vienna to Nuremberg where they had been kept between 1424 and 1796. On 12 September 1938, at the *Reichsparteitag* 'Großdeutschland' held as ever in Nuremberg, Hitler interpreted the meaning of this symbolic act. It was his intention, he said, to demonstrate 'not only our own people, but to the whole world that more than five hundred years before the discovery of the new world a powerful Germanic-German Reich already existed. The German people has now awoken ... The new Italian-Roman empire, and the new Germanic-German Reich are, in

reality, age-old phenomena. No one has to love them. But no power in the world will ever get rid of them again.’⁸

After 1939 Hitler sought to revoke the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 in a western direction and to re-establish the western border of the Holy Roman Empire. He also wanted to annexe and re-Germanise Burgundy. On 9 April 1940, the day of the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, he proclaimed to his closest collaborators: ‘Just as the Reich arose from the year 1866, so the Greater German Reich will arise from today’.⁹ In the ‘Greater German Reich’ Germanic people like the Danes, Norwegians, Dutch and Flemings were supposed to join together under German leadership in a community characterised by racial purity but no longer a national state. Hitler thus revived the old pre-national idea of the *Germania magna* which had already been embraced by German humanists around 1500, and again by Ernst Moritz Arndt in the early 19th century, but which, given the situation in 1940, seemed more like a ‘post-national’ project.

As far as the East was concerned, during the pre-war years of the ‘Third Reich’ Hitler had constantly called to mind that since the Middle Ages it had been Germany’s historic mission to protect Europe against dangers and assaults from the East. The upshot of this was that Germany now had to serve as a western bulwark against Bolshevism. After the attack on the Soviet Union this part of Germany’s supposed mission once again took pride of place in propaganda. It was not only leading politicians, but German historians too, who sought to justify the new crusade. Hermann Heimpel, who had been teaching at the ‘Reichs-universität’ in Strasburg since 1941, deliberately pointed out that the ‘medieval Reich, the imperial

auctoritas over the independent peoples of the West, had always taken its inner legitimacy from the Crusades in the East'.¹⁰ To Reinhard Wittram, then a professor at the 'Reichsuniversität' in Posen, the German was the 'soldier of Europe', who would bring about a 'new order' and thus allow Europe to become 'whole' again. He would do this by fighting the 'pernicious ideology' of the East, the 'destructive force [*Widerkraft*] that calls into question everything that has given historical status to this part of the world'.¹¹

We cannot be sure whether Wittram was actually referring to the Anti-Christ here, but it seems highly likely. Hitler did not call the Anti-Christ by name, but certainly made reference to him on 30 January 1942 on the ninth anniversary of his 'seizure of power'. On this occasion, in the Berlin Palace of Sport, he once again gave notice of the annihilation of the Jews and made the following prophecy: 'And the hour will come when the world's most evil enemy of all time will have no further role to play for at least a thousand years'.¹² In the thousand years between the defeat of the Anti-Christ and the Day of Judgement the devil would no longer have any power over humans. Without actually naming his biblical source, Hitler was invoking Revelation, Chapter 20, to convince the Germans of the magnitude of their historic mission, their mission to save the world.

May 1945 saw the demise not only of Adolf Hitler's 'Third Reich', but also of Otto von Bismarck's second Reich and with it the much older Reich myth. The Germans were not the only nation to have produced a concept of empire. Closest to the German Reich myth with its theological overtones was the medieval myth of Moscow as the 'Third Rome', the heir of Byzantium and thus also of ancient Rome — a notion still forceful

politically in Russia today. But the concepts of empire of the historical occident lacked the eschatological dimension of the German Reich myth. This was true of the British idea of empire, of the ideological justifications for the French empire under Napoleon, and the *Impero* cult in Fascist Italy. At the end of May 1945, just a few weeks after the German capitulation, Thomas Mann gave a speech in English on 'Germany and the Germans' in the Library of Congress in Washington. Here he declared what he saw as the most striking characteristic of recent German history: the lasting and continuing influence of the Middle Ages. The renaissance of the Reich myth in the twentieth century certainly supports this view.

At the turn of the year 1843/44, in the introduction to his critique of Hegel's philosophy of law, Marx wrote this sentence: 'In Germany emancipation from the Middle Ages is only possible if at the same time it is emancipation from partial moves beyond the Middle Ages.'¹³ For him Luther's Reformation was an example of this — a view that Thomas Mann was to repeat a hundred years later in somewhat different words when he called Luther a 'conservative revolutionary' who had preserved Christianity.¹⁴ Another example of partially moving beyond the Middle Ages would be the Reich founded by Bismarck — that 'revolution from above' which solved the problem of German unity, but postponed solving the question of freedom. Seen from this perspective, Germany did not really emancipate itself from the Middle Ages until much later, nearly 400 years after the Reformation, about 100 years after Marx's verdict, and just about three-quarters of a century after Bismarck's Reich was founded: when it was shaken to the core by the defeat of 1945.

There *was* a German *Sonderweg*. It was the long path towards modernity taken by a country shaped and moulded by the Middle Ages. The partial moves beyond the Middle Ages that Germany made can also be seen as partial modernisations. What remained of the Middle Ages stood alongside the modern and reshaped it until the old was imbued with the new and the new with the old. This was true of Bismarck's Reich and also, in a radically different way, of the 'Third Reich'. Hitler's rule was the pinnacle of Germany's rebellion against the political ideas of the West, to which it was, after all, linked culturally and socially in so many ways. It is only by looking at what Germany had in common with the West that it becomes possible to talk of a German *Sonderweg* of any sort at all.

Germany's anti-western *Sonderweg* came to an end in 1945. In contrast to 1918, in 1945 there was a serious break in political, social and moral continuity. Over the years, the experience of National Socialism and its crimes, above all the annihilation of the European Jews, deprived German nationalism of all legitimacy. In retrospect the 'Third Reich' was transformed into the irrefutable *argumentum e contrario* for western democracy. Thus, however paradoxical this may sound, the catastrophic failure of the German revolution against democracy has a similar place in the Germans' collective memory as that accorded to a successful democratic revolution by other nations.

The end of the anti-western *Sonderweg* was not, however, the end of all German *Sonderwege*. Soon after 1945 Catholic conservatives sought to transfer the concept of the Reich to Europe. At the sixth sitting of the Parliamentary Council on 20 October 1948, the Christian Democrat Deputy Adolf Süsterhenn disputed whether, in retrospect, Bismarck's Reich, the Weimar

Republic and the 'Third Reich' had any right to the term 'Reich' at all. 'The Reich concept, as it had survived in German history for a thousand years, was the concept of a supranational, European structure. It described the Christian West. If I were going to translate the term Reich into the language of modern politics I would have to call it European Union or European Federation.'¹⁵ Eleven years later, in 1959, Paul Wilhelm Wenger, the Bonn editor of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, wrote a book called *Wer gewinnt Deutschland?*, in which he called for Germany to be absorbed into a federal Europe. Modifying the medieval formula, he described the process of western European integration as 'translatio imperii ad Europam foederatam'.¹⁶

Süsterhenn and Wenger were two of the conservative pioneers of the old Federal Republic's 'post-national' self-perception, which gradually migrated from right to left from the 1960s onwards. In 1976 the liberal Bonn historian Karl Dietrich Bracher described the Federal Republic for the first time as a 'post-national democracy among national states', a formula that became famous when Bracher repeated it ten years later, in 1986, in the fifth volume of the *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*.¹⁷ In 1988 Oskar Lafontaine, then Minister President of the Saarland and regional leader of the Saarland Social Democrats, published his book *Die Gesellschaft der Zukunft*. One of the chapters deals with 'Moving beyond the National State'. Its main thesis goes like this: 'Precisely because we Germans have never managed to achieve complete national unity, and will not do so in the foreseeable future, precisely because we Germans have had the most appalling experience of a perverted nationalism, this is precisely why it should be easier for us to do without a national state than for other nations, for

whom the emergence of the national state will always go hand in hand with the development of a democratic society. Given their most recent history, the Germans are positively predestined to take on the leading role in the process of unifying Europe above the level of the national state.’¹⁸

Predestination by dint of perversion: Lafontaine wasn’t likely to get many outside the Federal Republic to agree to Germany’s new mission. The Germans had destroyed *their* national state — there could be no quibbling about that. But this did not mean that it was now their mission to deny other nations the right to their national states (which had generally existed for far longer), and to force upon them a post-national identity. Bracher had used his formula ‘post-national democracy among national states’ to describe a peculiarity of the old Federal Republic. Lafontaine wanted to make the new *Sonderweg* into the ideal path towards Europe, in other words, to make the Federal Republic into a model for the whole continent, or it least its western part. After German reunification Jürgen Habermas was still talking of the ‘post-national constellation’.¹⁹ What he meant was a trend whose effects he saw not only in Europe but world-wide: a general consequence of globalisation.

It is also possible to talk of a *Sonderweg* as far as the German Democratic Republic is concerned. Of course, all member states of the Warsaw Pact embraced ‘proletarian internationalism’. But none of them had less of a national identity than the GDR. As a non-national state, it was virtually condemned to define itself as an ideological state — which it did to the bitter end. In a piece for *Radio DDR* in 1989 Otto Reinhold, Rektor of the *Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften* at

the SED Central Committee, declared: 'The key question is ... what one could call the socialist identity of the GDR ... In this question there is, quite clearly, a difference in principle between the GDR and the other socialist countries. Before they were transformed into socialist states, they had all existed as states with capitalist or semi-feudal systems. Therefore their statehood did not depend primarily on their social system. It was quite different in the GDR, which is only conceivable as an anti-Fascist, socialist alternative to the FRG. What reason would there be for a capitalist GDR to exist alongside a capitalist Federal Republic? None, of course'.²⁰

The exaggeratedly 'internationalist', 'socialist' identity of the GDR was a Party and state doctrine, the 'post-national' identity of the Federal Republic neither one thing nor the other, but still the self-perception of a generation of intellectuals. Since reunification on 3 October 1990 all post-war *Sonderwege* have definitely come to an end. Reunited Germany is not a 'post-national democracy among national states', but one among other post-classical national states, tied, from the start, into supranational alliances such as the European Union and NATO. Where Germany is, where its boundaries run, what does and doesn't belong to it — all this has been sorted out since 3 October 1990. There is no longer a German question.

What happened on 3 October 1990 is rightly described as 'reunification'. Two republics were unified whose citizens had already lived together in one state before, between 1871 and 1945. They joined together in the territory that remained of the German Reich after 1945. There is much that distinguishes the second German national state from the first. The new Federal Republic is no longer what the Reich was before 1918:

power state, military state, authoritarian state. But alongside all the differences there are also continuities. Reunified Germany can link up with what the Reich before 1933 *also* was: constitutional state based on the rule of law, federal state, welfare state, a state with a parliamentary culture that had already emerged during the Bismarck Reich, long before parliamentary democracy was introduced, a state with universal suffrage, also accorded to women since 1919. And there is also another continuity, a territorial one: The Two-Plus-Four Treaty of 1990, the international birth certificate of the reunified Germany, legitimised, to some extent, the 'lesser-German' solution of 1866 and 1871, insofar as it excluded the 'greater-German' one.

Reunified Germany today is no less 'western' than the old Federal Republic. The new Federal Republic has accepted the increased sovereignty inherent in the Two-Plus-Four Treaty. This is demonstrated, amongst other things, by the fact that the Bundeswehr has taken part in NATO operations in former Yugoslavia and is now playing an active role in the fight against terrorism. Integration into the West has also gone further in another sphere, that of nationality law. The reform of 1999, which makes it easier for foreigners living in Germany to become German, has changed the German concept of 'nation'. The nation can no longer be conceived of purely as a community of common descent, it is also a community of wills. The old nationality law of 1913, which confirmed the *jus sanguinis* and thus rejected, in principle, the *jus soli*, has passed into history.

History is something that has taken on new meaning for the Germans since 1990. In the old Federal Republic, especially in the 1980s, there was a tendency to fore-shorten historical consciousness. What counted as positive was the 'success story' of the Federal Republic.

The opposite negative pole was the Nazi period, or rather its quintessence, the Holocaust. German nineteenth and twentieth-century history was increasingly interpreted as the refutation of the German national state, if not of the national state as such. Now that there is, once again, a democratically constituted German national state, this interpretation of German history obviously has to be corrected. Not the solution to the unity problem in the nineteenth century, but the non-solution of the freedom question is now regarded as the most crucial inherited defect of the first German national state. It was not the national state as such that led to catastrophe. The path into the abyss started with the arrogance of those who saw the Reich as more than one national state among others, and wanted it to be so.

It is a history full of contradictions, which the Germans have to adopt. It is no good their lamenting the great revolution they missed, thereby clinging to a myth that draws its strength from envy of other nations' revolutions and reflects retrospective wishful thinking. The self-critical adoption of German history involves a willingness to face up to all kinds of historical mythology wherever it originates from — and this includes both the right-wing Reich myth and the left-wing revolution myth. The Germans owe it to themselves, but also to the rest of Europe, to look critically at their history. Only when they know where they come from will they also know what they can contribute to Europe.

Translated by Jane Rafferty

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