

From "reunification" to "self-determination"

## A GERMAN DETENTE

by Thomas Kielinger

Amidst the sound and the fury that attended last year's missile controversy came an astonishing development in relations between the two Germanies, one which seemed to go against the prevailing winds of East-West tensions. While Moscow and its stalwart ally East Berlin were threatening hellfire if Bonn went ahead with NATO plans to station Pershing II missiles, exchanges on all levels between East and West Germany were never more relaxed. And (touch wood) 1984 continues on the same promising note on which 1983 left off.

What all of this may augur for the future of East-West relations as a whole cannot yet be fully ascertained. One thing is clear, though: The two halves of a divided Germany are in rather a hurry to isolate themselves as best they can from the deteriorating international climate, attempting to reach a *modus vivendi* that might shelter them from the slings and arrows of outrageous political fortune. True, they may be doing this for fundamentally different reasons; but it would not be the first time that quite separate assessments of the benefits had led two countries to pursue their mutual interests.

What is noticeably absent during this *pas de deux* is the acrimony one might have expected it to create in the capitals of the two big powers. There would seem to be a tacit agreement between the United States, engrossed in its presidential election, and the Soviet Union, deeply troubled about its ongoing succession problems, that what is developing between the two Germanies does not cut deep enough to affect in a measurable way the existing balance of power in Europe. Were this otherwise, the rapprochement could not proceed. Thus, their activity seems strictly in accordance with the existing political order, pursued moreover by nations that enjoy a high degree of confidence within their respective alliances.

What are the passions that stoke this springtime of relations in the very heart of Europe? Clearly, the Federal Republic cannot and will not abandon its historical commitment to a united Germany (one whose boundaries are not precisely drawn) or its constitutional warrant to speak for *all* Germans. Non-Germans must continually learn this lesson anew. It was wrong to believe that with the conclusion of the East-West treaties of the 1970s—treaties that legitimized the Federal Republic's *Ostpolitik*—the German

questions had somehow gone away. Countries do not resemble computers that can be reprogrammed according to the availability of the latest political software.

And yet there *has* been a certain reprogramming of the German question over the last fifteen years. It was former Chancellor Willy Brandt who first declared in the early '70s that, to him at least, the term "reunification" no longer had a practical application. What was a rather earth-shattering admission at the time has been quietly accepted by the vast majority of Brandt's countrymen since. And there is no disputing the fact that, by upholding freedom and liberal democracy as their unquestioned priority, the West Germans have probably deepened the partition of the national territory whose unity they so fervently espouse. For those with a regard for history and for the fate of brothers and sisters behind the iron curtain, it is a stiff price to pay.

It is precisely this realization that has led to West Germany's renewed emphasis on intra-German relations and on the German question as a whole. On the one hand, it wants to soften the impact of partition, or, as Chancellor Kohl put in his State of the Union message of March 13, "to alleviate the results of partition for the sake of the people, and to make the situation less dangerous" (this last an allusion to the heightened tensions after deployment of the missiles). On the other hand, West Germany wants to find a way of addressing the national question this side of political impracticality. If "reunification" rings hollow for politicians—who are measured, after all, not by how eloquently they speak to the never-never but, rather, by how skillfully they cope with the here-and-now—then some reprogramming must indeed occur.

Their answer lies in a change of focus. The leading German politicians now speak more often of "freedom" than of "reunification," of "self-determination" than of "territoriality." None other than the minister of intra-German affairs in the conservative Kohl government, Heinrich Windelen, articulated this at a recent seminar of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Washington, D.C.: "We do not seek, as our top priority, the resurrection of a unified national territory"—implying that the absence of free choice for the East Germans is more relevant than the absence of territorial unity (to which the Federal Republic continues to lay claim under international law). One of Mr. Kohl's advisors, historian Michael Stürmer, made this point even more explicitly during the same conference: "Germany's national aspiration is not directed at a certain territorial entitlement but, rather, at complete self-determination."

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Their hypothesis: that an East German population, offered a free choice, might not opt for amalgamation with the Western half of Germany but, instead, for an Austrian-type solution—that is, neutral status as an independent German-speaking country. If such a solution were freely arrived at, it would be perfectly agreeable to the West German body politic. Indeed, Franz-Josef Strauss suggested as much all of twenty-six years ago.

This shift of focus to “self-determination” has rekindled the Germans’ own interest in the national question. It is easy to see why. The term “self-determination,” given prominence in the Charter of the United Nations, is part of the common language of international relations. It figures prominently in the debates about the postcolonial Third World and underlies Eastern Europe’s continuing opposition to the Soviet rule imposed after Yalta. What used to be spoken of irritably as *querelles Allemandes* has now been internationalized and is viewed as one of the common aspirations of mankind. At the same time, Germans must assuage the fears of friends and foes alike that the quest for German unity might somehow, someday, again lead to the destabilization of the European equilibrium—fears that have persisted despite the firmly rooted tradition in West Germany to mention reunification only in relation to an all-European solution. To quote Chancellor Kohl once more: “Unity through self-determination can only be achieved as a peaceful effort in an overall European context. Anyone who fails to recognize this fact, who ignores the European dimension of the German question, is denying historical experience.” Thus realpolitik finds its proper definition, and all neutralist dreamers receive short shrift.

#### THE OTHER SIDE

If the Federal Republic’s primary interest in the German question has to do with day-to-day improvements in human ties and an internationally acceptable way of expressing the national *telos*, East Germany has no such lofty goals. To the Communists who claim to have built “the first socialist state on German soil,” trade and economic benefits are the be all and end all of intra-German relations. The country, now suffering one of the worst spells in its industrial history (no doubt fueled by the economic plight of its Polish comrades in arms, to whom it has reluctantly channeled some of its resources), is in great need of hard currency and outlets for its industry. The East German regime already has duty-free access to the Common Market, which accepts Bonn’s attestations to a one-and-undivided German people; draws on interest-free “swing” credit lent to it by the Bonn government on a short-term basis; and derives a cornucopia of other benefits from the West German desire to improve human contacts and get prisoners of conscience out of East German jails. The GDR is now being extremely liberal in dealing with applications for exit visas submitted by thousands upon thousands of its disgruntled citizens in the not unrealistic hope that such “concessions” might induce Bonn to agree to another loan arrangement like the one facilitated last summer—though this time substantially larger.

Eight per cent of the German Democratic Republic’s foreign trade is with West Germany—two-thirds of its entire trade with the West. But the exchange is not mutual, all the merrymaking and fraternization at the recent Leipzig Trade Fair notwithstanding. Bonn’s trade with the GDR

amounts to only 1.5 per cent of the Federal Republic’s foreign trade and is running at a deficit. Despite such deals as the recent lucrative agreement by the Peine Salzgitter Company to produce specially wide steel sheets for East Germany, West Germany is investing in the East primarily to better intra-German relations and to stabilize an internationally volatile situation.

As one reviews the German question anew one must not overlook two paradoxes. First, the more the two Germanies invest in stable relations with one another, the more enduring becomes the very separation itself. By working diligently with the Communist authorities to lessen the effects of the country’s division in human terms, the Bonn government is according an increasing degree of respectability to an otherwise despised regime. This will become more apparent when Mr. Honecker, East Germany’s leader, makes his much-vaunted visit to the Federal Republic in the fall of this year. In fact, his regime only appears to be liberalizing procedures such as those for emigration. Already there are signs that when the current group of dissidents has been allowed to leave, the authorities will place even more stringent controls on all East-West personal contacts. The current emigration falls more in the category of a safety valve: You rid yourself of a certain residue of frustrated people and, in the process, ease your growing unemployment problems. As to internal freedom of movement, nothing will change if the godfather in Moscow can help it. Let the West German tourists bring their coveted foreign exchange and be done with them. Who has to foster real people-to-people exchanges when one can have his economic cake and eat it too!

The second paradox relates to Bonn and the matter of Western security. Only a reliable and militarily strong West Germany can exercise sufficient clout with the East and continue to hold the Communists accountable to at least a modicum of civilized behavior. Bonn would immediately lose all leverage with its Eastern counterpart if it allowed itself to be used as a pawn in an international game. The relationship would change from the businesslike quid pro quo to some ideological tap-dancing. And even that would not last very long, since a mistrusted West Germany, drifting in the wind, would be completely undercut by its quite naturally alarmed allies.

But that is not the suit of Mr. Kohl and his government anyway. The chancellor is using every opportunity to emphasize Bonn’s soberness, the fundamental value differences between the two systems, and West Germany’s abiding commitment to freedom and deterrence. This adds to his stature in the eyes of the East (where they recognize an unwavering Western politician when they see one), it increases his credit rating with his friends in the West, and it earns him the right to continue pursuing German interests as only Germans themselves can evaluate them.

In fact, the Reagan administration has begun to be openly supportive of intra-German détente, recognizing that no useful purpose can be served by promoting in the heart of Europe the East-West tensions that exist elsewhere in the world. And Moscow too cannot fail to see the advantages to having the economy of its key ally propped up so handsomely by a willing Western hand. **[WV]**