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# A country to envy?

## Thirty years after reunification, Britain still does not really know what it wants of Germany. But the tide might be turning

*Read this article in German.*

The fall of the Berlin Wall could and should have been a great moment for celebrating Britain's role in the rebirth of democratic Germany. An oppressive communist system was dismantled with extraordinary success. Margaret Thatcher, alongside Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, had an important part to play. Yet all she saw was danger. A month after the incredible scenes in Berlin, she told EU leaders at a dinner in Strasbourg: 'Twice we beat the Germans. Now they are there again.' Pulling out maps of Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia from her handbag, she intoned to French president François Mitterrand: 'They'll take all of that, and Czechoslovakia too.'

To her credit, she admitted in her memoirs that she had got it wrong: 'If there is one instance in which a foreign policy I pursued met with unambiguous failure, it was my policy on German reunification.'

30 years on, Britain still doesn't quite seem to know what it wants of Germany. When its economy struggles, as it did in the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, it is derided as the 'sick man of Europe', over-regulated and hidebound. When Deutschland AG corners global markets, it is over-weaning and rapacious. The British don't want Germany to throw its weight around the world, yet they do want it to pull its weight.

Perhaps, just perhaps, I am beginning to wonder whether the tide might be turning. The trigger, if not cause, for a reassessment of Germany has been the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost every media interview with a British government minister contains the question: 'but why can't we do it more like the Germans?'

## A fresh reassessment of Germany

The measure of a country – or an institution or individual for that matter – is not the difficulties it faces, but how it surmounts them. On that test, contemporary Germany is a country to be envied. It has developed a maturity that few others can match.

When I started writing my book 'Why the Germans do it better' in 2018, I saw its title as deliberately provocative. Some, even now, bridle at its inference. One reviewer called it: 'Brexit revenge porn'. But he was a rare exception. To my shock, the book seems to have struck a chord in a UK where the more forward-thinking search for a new for the country, while the nostalgic cling to past glories as balm. It was not just that the book shot into the best sellers top 10 list in its first week ... which author wouldn't want that? More important to me is the fact that it seems to have triggered a fresh conversation, suggesting a thirst better to understand what it is that works so well in Germany – and what doesn't.

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Any assessment of contemporary Germany begins with Angela Merkel, the ultimate crisis manager. Taking over the country halfway through the reunification story, she is inevitably associated with its successes and failures. On the latter scoresheet, I would list the insensitivity of the *Treuhand* privatisation body, the perceived arrogance of *Wessis* and the refusal to adopt even the odd advantage of the GDR such as women's rights. Perhaps the single biggest error was the failure to identify more people from the East to serve in senior positions and as broader role models.

## The Merkel era will soon end

Yet it is more instructive to look at the positives: I defy anyone to name any other nation that could have absorbed 17 million poor neighbours with so little trauma?

Another anniversary was marked a few weeks ago with equally mixed emotions: in 2015 Germany allowed in one million of the world's most destitute. In the first few months, just over half the population over the age of sixteen got involved in one way or another to help the refugees. The influx provided fuel to the *Alternative für Deutschland* and its politics of grievance, racism and populism. But as the Chancellor pointed out: what was she, a German, supposed to do? Build camps? Another

example of the new Germany that is all too often under-appreciated by its own citizens.

Merkel's time is soon up. Germany will have to get used to its first new leader in a generation. The change will go far beyond personnel. The country is already feeling the strain of past certainties removed. What happened to the rule of law around the world? What happened to the spread of human rights? What happened to an international order that was deceptively secure? Now, as much of the contemporary world succumbs to authoritarianism, as democracy is undermined from its heart by an out-of-control American president, a powerful China and a vengeful Russia, one country – Germany – stands as a bulwark for decency and stability.

## An anchor of stability

The irony is that the one partner in Europe Germany has probably most aligned with is Britain. As a result, the pain surrounding the UK's departure from the EU is real, but they have already moved on. At a British-German dinner in Berlin in 2019, the justice minister at the time, Katarina Barley, gave this painful prediction: 'Even if we agree with you in the future, we will always be more distant, because family comes first – and you are no longer family.'

Britain is now *Die Insel*, nothing more, nothing less. Brexit is dealt with in German political circles with studied indifference. The UK is mired in monolingual mediocrity, its reference points extending to the US and not much further. By contrast, most Germans are taught two foreign languages at school. Perhaps as a result, I am always struck by a cultural curiosity that is truly international.

Germany knows that its entire post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation is based on the notion of Europe, for which compromises on sovereignty are unavoidable. It needs the European Union. But it needs more than that. It needs someone to defend liberal democracy, now that the American comfort blanket has gone. As Thomas Bagger, foreign-policy adviser to President Frank-Walter Steinmeier puts it: 'The Trump challenge goes much deeper than just policy disagreements,' Bagger says. 'His approach pulls the rug from under the feet of German foreign-policy thinking. Germany has lost its moorings.' He then offers something that stays with me: 'Our problem is that we expect everyone to learn the same lessons as we do.'

Those with longer memories struggle to accept the notion of Germany as a moral and political beacon. It cannot act alone. But, 30 years on from

those momentous events which appeared to signal the spreading of democracy around the world, the Western world needs Germany more than it, or Germans, dare to admit.

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**John Kampfner**
London

John Kampfner is author of *Why the Germans Do It Better; Notes from a Grown-Up Country*.