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# The German question, from the Holy Roman Empire to the Berlin wall

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**Abstract:** The “German Question” refers to a series of conflicts and revolutions that lasted from 1806 to 1990 and faced the unresolved problem: Where exactly are Germany’s borders, and who belongs to them? Denoting the unification of German-speaking regions, the “German Question” led, in the 19th and 20th centuries, to several wars, territorial changes, and founding of states. Since German reunification in 1990, it has been considered solved in historical studies. The effect of that period was not limited to Germany but also had implications on a wider geopolitical scale. In summary, the issue of “Einheit und Freiheit,” literally the dichotomy of “unity and freedom” of the German “volk” (people), has remained unresolved for a long time. Therefore, in various ways, it has repeatedly come back into modern European history. Moreover, the argument also includes the fact that from time to time, a unified Germany, due to its vast, decentralized, and dynamic characteristics, has been a challenge to the stability of the European state system itself. In this research note, different viewpoints on this German problem are presented, both from the German perspective and from an ‘outsider’ perspective.

**Keywords:** ■ Germany ■ Nationalism ■ Modern European History ■ Intellectual heritage

## 1- Introduction

The German problem is also known by its literal translation in German as “Die Deutsche Frage,” which means the German question. The basic difference in interpretation is that this question is meant to be perceived as a “problem” when viewed from outside Germany. In detail, the German question refers to the complex of problems of German unity that remained unresolved in European history between 1806 and 1990 and recurred again and again in different forms. It revolved around Germany’s borders and territorial order. With reunification in 1990, the German question is now considered resolved, especially since Germany is a member of the United Nations and

the European Union with equal rights to other states. In a broader European sense, the German question is also the question posed since the late Middle Ages of how this central country in the middle of Europe, with the best facilities for prosperity and a dominant position on the continent, can be contained and controlled to the advantage of the other (European) powers. Such a point came up almost cyclically in the intellectual debates around major historical events that shaped not only Germany but also had implications on a wider geopolitical scale during modern Europe. The debate on this controversial issue has been ongoing for roughly two centuries, and this research note tries to clarify its trajectory. In summary, the issue of “Einheit und Freiheit,” literally the dichotomy of “unity and freedom” of the German people “Volk,” has been unsolved for a long time. Therefore, in different ways, it has recurred in modern European history repeatedly.

We should consider the basic question of Germany’s status, from both the institutional and geographical perspectives, as a “genetic issue.” This is a common occurrence in other nations as well. Within Europe, the question had similarities to the Italian or Polish situations in terms of their respective national constructions. In the first half of the XIX century, Germany, Italy, and Poland for example were all just rough distinct regions in geographical terms. The countries were characterized by geographical fragmentation, with some parts being under foreign domination, but still lacking a political context and the practical possibility of self-determination. But, there were nonetheless past times or epochs in the people’s memory when Germany, Italy or Poland existed already as states, and this played an important role in determining people’s future perspectives. In the case of Italy, 1871 is intended as the unification year of the Italian peninsula and the establishment of the Italian state (the same year as the proclamation of the German Empire). However, other schools of thought consider the victory of 1918 over the Austro-Hungarian Empire that ended WWI to be the last true war of independence fought for the unification of Italy.

Germany is therefore, along with other nations, a “*Verspätete Nation*”, meaning a latecomer nation, as Helmut Plessner (1949)<sup>1)</sup> once wrote. The national movements that animated Germany in the XIX century were not much different from the rise of irredentism in other nations. Such common struggles are exemplified by the European wide revolts that characterised the years 1848-49. On the other hand, it has only been around Germany that the issue has taken on such catastrophic aspects and implications for two centuries. This is also due to the country’s geographical location at the heart of Europe and its lack of a main maritime expansion possibility. Every “movement” that Germany made inevitably shook its continental neighbours.

To discuss the different points of view about the German problem from the German perspective and from an “outsider” perspective, it is crucial to establish a

temporal framework. This has also been a debate *per-se* within the German question. As a general agreement among scholars, it is during the XIX century that the issue first appeared. As previously mentioned, it was closely associated with the notions of nationalism and the development of nation states. Calleo (1990) is among those historians who consider this issue from 1870, while others have defined the German question as a consequence of the Treaty of Westphalia, which dates back to 1648. The majority of German scholars prefer to solve the complicated issue of German unity and freedom by focusing on the period between 1806 and 1990. 1806 represents, in fact, the dissolution of the “Holy Roman Empire” by Napoleon Bonaparte’s enforced resolution.<sup>2)</sup> Such humiliation was strongly felt by the German patriotic spirit, which was already present in the population through Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas (1744-1803). This humiliation has been seen from a standpoint of revanchism ever since. Along with the downfall of Napoleon, the Confederation of the Rhine, being part of Imperial France, was rejected, but German pride was somehow reconfigured with the Vienna Congress a few years later in 1814-15. However, from the German popular perspective, this convention was again insufficient, particularly in terms of the political aspects related to the “freedom” issue.

## **2- From the German perspective**

The way people discuss “die Deutsche Frage” has undoubtedly evolved over time. The issue of unity and freedom for the German people now seems to younger generations to be a matter of the past and a discussion limited to historians. In short, it is a status that has been achieved and, based on the experience during Nazi times, a problem that should not occur again.

Nevertheless, an illustrative example sums up all attempts of interpretation before examining the historical considerations on how the German question was intended by the Germans themselves. The flag of the German federal president today is, in fact, a continuation since the XII century of Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor’s coat of arms. The German perspective becomes much easier to understand through the use of this representation.

Since the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the German question for the Germans initially focused on the form of the state in which the Germans wanted to live. The initial goal was to address the spatial dimension rather than political freedom. Rarely, in fact, were the two sides answered together at the same time in a unifying solution.

From 1815, the traditional political institutions and culture of the Germans have reflected this geographical perspective. To the Austrian monarchy it was given

this crucial task for the first time with the creation of a German Alliance to replace the gone Holy Roman Empire. The Congress of Vienna endorsed the idea of a “big German” solution, “*Grössdeutsch*,” in which all Germans would be united under the Catholic Habsburg.

Conversely, in terms of mentality, in the following years the German perspective started to shift towards more religious differences between the northern and southern states of the German territory. Confession between Catholics and Protestants was still a significant identity factor in comparison to today’s times. This was followed by a rise in popular democratization movements that spread throughout Europe after the restoration period. Therefore, apart from national motives, confessional, domestic, and parochial interests also played an important role in addressing the evolution of the “German question” during the first half of the XIX century.

During the revolts of 1848-49, papers, brochures, and books were produced that promoted republican movements and unity among German-speaking people. These revolutionary years were the first solid occasion for the German people to openly discuss such topics. At the Frankfurt National Assembly (May 1848 - June 1849), the question about which dimensions and types of organization the planned German nation state should have was widely addressed.

This represents in summary the German idea during the whole XIX century, a small or great German dimension with a republican form of government. Until a few years ago, the national anthem on the German national television always depicted Frankfurt’s Paulskirche (the place of the assembly in 1848) with the German colours established at the time (black, red and gold) at the end of the broadcasting schedule. This initial attempt to establish a democratic confederation in Frankfurt am Main remains, in German thinking, part of their cyclical struggle to address the freedom dimension of the “German question” similar to what occurred later in German history during the Weimar Republic. In fact, the revolution of 1848 did not succeed in securing a republican form of government. Neither was King Wilhelm I of Prussia in a position of readiness to recognize the assembly in Frankfurt and receive a governing mandate from this parliament.

Following the defeat of both the Austrians in Königgrätz in 1866 and the French at Sedan in 1870, those vibrant years represent more of a solution to the spatial dimension of the unity “*Einheit*” question, rather than the institutional question of freedom. In this sense, under the Protestant Prussian leadership of the Hohenzollern and Bismarck governments, German popular thinking accepted the answer to the German geographic question as solved. To put it another way, the acceptance of a small German spatial solution “*Die Kleindeutsche Lösung*” but not yet a solution that adheres to its democratic principles. Moreover, in Otto von Bismarck’s view, the unification of 1871 in a German Empire was first and foremost the appropriate and sufficient answer at the

time to address the popular “German question” and calm down the spirits; at least until the end of his tenure.

The Weimar Republic, established after the defeat of Monarchist Germany in WWI, was seen as another attempt to finally establish democracy. This outcome was the end result of Germany’s expansionist efforts to address its geographical dimension during the comfortable past twenty years of economic development before the war. The prosperous years before WWI (*La belle époque* in French) were also marked by German colonial expansion and overseas competition with other European colonial powers. Even though in the German mind of the time, the Republic of the 1920s represented a democratic achievement (compared to the past seventy years of the Empire), as argued by Calleo (1990) the dichotomy between cultural flowering and political disorder that characterized Weimar led to the immoderate politics of the Thirties. Therefore, Hitler, in a German perspective, came at a specific time and with a particular mission to establish the unity of the German people, both at home and abroad, and finally to address the German question of Versailles (second) humiliation with, also for the second time, a “Grössdeutsch Lösung.” This larger German dimension was contemplated but not achieved in the century before the rise of National Socialism. The decision to unify with Austria (the *Anschluss*) should be considered from this perspective, even though it’s easy to justify the reason behind it by the fact that Hitler was of Austrian origin himself. Hitler’s geopolitical ideas and policies, from a purely German point of view, aimed at preserving the continental European balance by unifying the dispersed German population, while external powers (the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Soviet Union) at the time created hostility by meddling all around *Mittel-Europa*.<sup>3)</sup> From this perspective, Germany was being condemned to mediocrity and, eventually, all of continental Europe was going to be subjected to external domination (which actually really happened after WWII).

What followed the defeat of World War II and the partition of Germany under the polarization of the Soviet Union and the United States has been another condemnation and humiliation for the Germans due to their particular geographical position. In fact, dividing Germany into two parts was considered unviable in the long run. Chancellor Adenauer never intended Bonn to be the “official” capital of Western Germany (the Federal Republic - FRG). However, since only one side was capable of achieving democracy (in the way democracy is meant to be practiced in the West), the German question of freedom seemed to have been fulfilled by the FRG at that point (Habermas:1979).<sup>4)</sup> But, since the population was partitioned, the unity of all German people has been lost again. The people in East and West Germany retained their identity as Germans and persisted in their demand for unity until the 1960s. This wish was ultimately condemned to a dream by the GDR’s construction of the Berlin Wall

in 1961. In this regard, the “*Ostpolitik*” initiated by Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr in the 1960s and 1970s is seen as a hand thrown to the eastern side, but with the long-term objective of reunification.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification led after 1990 by the architect of German unity Helmut Kohl, is the final re-dimensioned answer to the German question. That historical process at the time could address both its spatial and institutional democratic dimensions.<sup>5)</sup> Furthermore, for the Germans, unification was not only an answer to the pending German question itself, but also an example for the rest of Europe (especially its eastern flank). This historical process was lastly necessary to achieve the current form of the European Union.

### 3- From the non-German perspectives

From a German perspective, the “German question” represented an evolutionary attempt, indeed, full of vicissitudes, to achieve unity and freedom for the German people. Despite this, other European nations have viewed these two centuries in a different way. The main countries that addressed such concerns were indeed France and the United Kingdom.

France, in particular, has seen Germany as a problematic neighbour. As every nation has its own character, for France, Germany represented a puzzling country characterized by cruel behaviour. In diplomatic notes exchanged between France and Russia in 1802, there are already traces of the “German question” being addressed as a problem for both empires. This was stated in terms of the “containment of the lands between the Rhineland and the Eastern remote areas.”

Before the Locarno Treaty of 1925, it was hard to determine which side of the Rhine the idea of territorial expansion was legitimate from time to time. This was complicated by the long diatribe about whether the appropriate border should be considered a river (the Rhine) or a mountain chain (the Vosges). Nevertheless, in France after the Napoleonic epic, the responsibility of every *casus belli* was always attributed to Germany. Indeed, the Prussian-French war and the victory in 1871 for the German mindset is a retaliation reminiscent of the Napoleonic campaign of 1813. With the same sentiment, the proclamation of the German Empire by Wilhelm I on January 18th, 1871, at the palace of Versailles was later answered by France in 1919 with the Versailles treaty in the same location.

In summary, throughout the last two centuries, humiliation from one side has been met with humiliation from the other. Nevertheless, in this brutal back and forth vengeance, a mutual idea of each traditional enemy’s mentality paradoxically emerged as a positive note. Renoir’s film of 1937, “*La grande illusion*”, is emblematic in this sense

for understanding the discourse in the thirties regarding Germany and the crisis of the “*Front Populaire*” in France. Although the film is supposed to depict a WWI scenario, it actually provides a glimpse into its contemporary political narratives. After WWII, the long-lasting mutually bellicose experience helped finally establish the Franco-German understanding as a basis for the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Treaty in 1951.

On the other hand, Jacques Bainville<sup>6)</sup> wrote in 1920 in “*Les Conséquences politiques de la paix*” (the political consequences of peace), that the best solution to the German problem was to dismantle its unity, “*Einheit*”. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend the French perspective with still a certain traditional apprehension of a unified Germany. This fear reappeared in 1990 when Germany reunited under the leadership of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. It became apparent and visible in President Mitterrand’s concerns that such a French traditional mindset still existed. However, thirty-five years after the Rome treaty, the progress of the common project represented by the European Economic Community prevented a direct confrontation between France and Germany. At the same time, the EEC was also simultaneously reconciling the French acceptance of a reunited Germany with the joint monetary project of the Euro currency and the progressive European integration.

For the perspective from the United Kingdom about the German question, the most prominent British historian, A. J. P. Taylor (1945),<sup>7)</sup> provides us with a summary that is very British indeed. Taylor combined typical British Euro-scepticism with a strong sense of Germanophobia. Taylor was suspicious of Germany, as it was his reading of history, which made him suspicious of the German people as well. Even today, based on my own experience of living in the United Kingdom for several years, Germans are popularly considered to possess a restless desire to dominate Europe. This, historically compared to Britain’s tactics, has led the German nation to fail in any attempt to construct a permanent peaceful system in Europe in the past. The lack of good will on the part of the Germans was the determining factor. As Taylor expressed, an ideal European cooperation for peace in Europe would not even consider France, but rather a framework of Anglo-Russian rapprochement to contain Germany. In other words, the Germans were unable to control themselves and therefore needed to be controlled by other European states. This scepticism is still present in the popular perception within the United Kingdom, and the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum is partially due to this perspective associated with the European Union.

## 4- Conclusions

From the German perspective and the external perspective, the German question represents two sides of the same coin. On one side, Germany's own histories of aggressions, as well as the horrors of Nazi Germany, are being dumped on the German people as the culprits of the XX century atrocities.

On the other hand, Calleo's revisionist work provides us with a different perspective in the context of the evolution of nation-states within the European system and its broad geopolitical implications. The statement that history is written by the victorious powers encourages us to consider how a different history surrounding the "German question" could be interpreted.

However, during the recent Eurocrisis of 2008, Greek cartoonists inflamed the media with dozens of German politicians wearing Hitler moustaches. In the south of Europe during that critical time, it was popularly said that the Germans were once again pushing Europe to submit to them, this time not with tanks and infantry, but with a merciless debt policy. The New York Times has even seen the "German Question" to resurrect again. But differently than in the past, what this newspaper meant is the question of how this country in the heart of Europe can make the "old continent" dominate the world again.

Traditional misconceptions linger in the collective imagination and educational national histories remain prevalent in the textbooks. But as the years since the reunification of Germany fade away, perhaps the German question in the future will remain solely as a memory in such textbooks or a persistent dilemma for historians.

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- 1) A German philosopher and sociologist (1892-1985).
- 2) It is emblematic for the "German question" that a propaganda film produced during WWII, titled "Kohlberg" in 1943, when Nazi Germany declared total war against the Allies, reenacted the same issue of Prussian resistance against Napoleon in its dialogues.
- 3) A German term for Central Europe that bears cultural, geopolitical and historical connotations.
- 4) According to Jürgen Habermas only after 1945 there has been in Germany the unconditional opening to the political culture of the West, but only one part of Germany could carry out this opening before 1990.
- 5) Richard von Weizsäcker's speech at the Berliner Philharmonic premises to establish the German national day on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1990 stated the recognition of the Oder-Neisse border.
- 6) Jacques Pierre Bainville (1879-1936) was a French historian and journalist, as well as a geopolitical theorist about Franco-German relations.
- 7) A leading British historian (1906-1990) who specialised in European XIX and XX century diplomacy.

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