

Why is 'historical memory' still so significant in understanding German foreign and security policy?

Written by IJ Benneyworth

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Germany today is prosperous and industrious, especially in regenerated Berlin, a modern city steeped in history, from Prussian monuments to Cold War tourist spots. Also in evidence, both overtly and discreetly, is the history that links Berlin, and by extension Germany, to the Nazi-era and the Second World War. From the Holocaust memorial, to the deliberately unrecovered foundations of Gestapo headquarters, to rare war-era buildings bearing the scars of Red Army gunfire, this dark history and the associated 'historical memory' has maintained a grip on the German psyche.

This historical memory has often been used as a reason (more recently some would say excuse) for Germany's largely anti-militarist approach to its foreign and security policy. However, since the Cold War's conclusion it can be suggested that Germany has increasingly reasserted itself in foreign and security policy, albeit within the confines of a usually solid multilateral approach. This essay intends to examine the significance of historical memory in past and present German foreign and security policy approaches, and what power it has had to influence the behaviour of this nation whose efficient erasure of many physical scars cannot conceal the lingering presence and influence of psychological ones.

Firstly it is important to establish what effect historical memory has had in shaping the German mindset. There are schools of thought that, whether states adopt Neo-Realist or Neo-Liberal views, generally they will react to emerging circumstances and adapt their approaches accordingly. However, there is also a Constructivist viewpoint that essentially argues "that state behaviour is first and foremost shaped by the particular sets of normative and cognitive beliefs which a society and its leaders hold about the nation, its role in the international system, and the utility of military force in the realisation of national goals" (Berger 1997, p.41). This political-military culture "itself emerges out of an on-going political process in which the interpretation of the past plays a critical role" (ibid. p.42).

So just as militarism and nationalism became widely accepted in German pre-war culture (thanks to historical precedents such as the wars of unification and the prominence of the Prussian military in society), so did the opposites of those attitudes gain ground through gradual assimilation of post-war anti-militarist social norms and values to become the dominant cultural position. No national culture is monolithic, yet given the broad trauma that afflicted all subsets of German society it is reasonable that such a profound shift would have been facilitated by a conscious effort by the German body-politic and general population to break from the past, starting from *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour) and into *Nachkriegszeit* (after the war).

Post-war fallout did more than anything to weave historical memory into the German mentality. It was militarily crushed and more-or-less politically purged, the moral aspect of the defeat inciting the greatest self-revulsion, for forced to submit to judgement the Germans found themselves wanting. There was no denying that their military had set out on a march of conquest and left countless atrocities in its wake. In addition to this moral debt was the fact that in two global conflicts Germany had gone to war in an effort to advance national interests and twice it had been

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defeated, discrediting the notion that use of force was a viable or attractive option for pursuing national goals (Wittlinger and Larose 2007, p.484).

One initial manifestation of this anti-militarism was Article 87a of the Federal Republic's Basic Law, essentially forbidding aggressive warfare, as well as other measures to guarantee the right to conscientious objection (Berger 1997, p.47). War aversion quickly filtered into the national consciousness. Despite the Korean War being UN sanctioned, memories of the last war were still fresh and so *ohne mich*, or 'leave me out', was a common feeling. It is little surprise given this trepidation that the prospect of rearmament was highly contentious and though Konrad Adenauer advocated the formation of a 150,000 man West German army, not least in response to East German leader Walter Ulbricht's comparison of the Federal Republic to South Korea in the context of communist invasion, it was still 1954 before the Bundestag voted in support of limited rearmament (Kitchen 2006, p.327). Despite some residual suspicions not least from France, the West and especially the United States was keen to welcome Germany into the fold, suitably convinced of strides in its rehabilitation and its merits as an ally against the Eastern Bloc.

As well as being politically beneficial, alignment with the West had positive defensive dimensions for Germany. During the Cold War, the Federal Republic essentially subsumed itself into a collection of intergovernmental bodies such as the UN, the EC and NATO, almost as if it felt a need to be anchored to multilateral institutions to maintain a rational course, to effectively protect Germany from itself. A principal advantage was the defence umbrella enjoyed during this period, though it can be suggested that Germany was effectively 'let off the hook' regarding foreign and security policy, delegating many important issues to allies and institutions, allowing it to concentrate on economic development (Berger 1997, p.40). Though militarily capable, German armed forces were largely conscripted which was seen as socially beneficial, establishing firm civilian control of the military, providing a source of cheap labour for social services from those who objected to service on grounds of conscience, and helping maintain a positive connection with society for successive generations, reinforcing the cultural shift influenced by historical memory (Breuer 2006, p.215).

The Cold War's end significantly altered this dynamic. Reunification came swiftly, this itself on the back of growing German self-confidence thanks to economic prowess and increasing generational distance from wartime experiences. Germany saw itself as a solidly civilian power, increasingly comfortable to make its voice heard, such as early recognition of Croatia and Slovenia upon their independence, but never with too high a volume. In efforts to 'normalise', Germany became increasingly involved in matters of collective security, but still expressed caution when decisions took a military turn. It opted out of the first Gulf War in 1991, financially contributing instead, and emphasised the humanitarian aspects of ethnic cleansing of the Balkan campaigns to make involvement more palatable to the German public (Rathbun 2006, p.71).

With a full two decades since reunification, Germany has approached a crossroads and allies are becoming increasingly frustrated with an attitude to security involvement that still carries traces of *ohne mich*. Germany – like many of its neighbours admittedly – arguably grew too used to the protective umbrella of security guarantees and saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to cut defence spending, with consequent negative effects on equipment procurement and capability (Wagner 2005, p.466). Now, with many of the multilateral institutions it is a member of, not least NATO, actively engaged around the globe, the impetus is on Germany to contribute more and fulfil the kind of role its size and economy would normally encourage.

Admittedly Germany participated in the Kosovo campaign despite the absence of a UN mandate, and even in the latter Cold War years the Kohl government was supportive of Pershing II missile deployment on its territory and Reagan's SDI initiative (Berger 1997, p.50). The current Afghan deployment signals a significant step towards meeting allied requests in the modern geo-political environment as well. It is arguable that these have been more token efforts at maintaining alliance solidarity and indeed remain faithful to Germany's multilateral traditions, but even then opinion polling shows that general public sentiment is often unsure, this being potentially reflective of just how entrenched anti-militarism has become thanks to historical memory. To mollify this German forces operate under a number of protective caveats concerning their deployment, but this can only alienate allied nations, as well as restrict the operational efficiency and worth of the Bundeswehr as a reliable asset (Noetzel and Rid 2009, p.75). German governments, especially of the centre right, have shown progressive willingness to engage, yet their citizens and

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parties of the left, while less morally opposed to the use of force in humanitarian circumstances, still question its overall merits (Rathbun 2006, p.75) and, as with the recent Libya decision, just what ultimate outcomes would be produced and exit strategies allowed in any future engagements.

If historical memory is slowing movement to a more 'normalised', which is to say pro-active security policy, Germany has made significant strides in foreign policy. It is actively involved in E3 diplomatic initiatives to attempt to address the Iranian nuclear impasse (European Council 2009). Former deference to France in some EU matters has recently taken on a more assertive tone, not least due to Germany's role in promoting Euro-zone stability (Warner 2010), and its bilateral relationship with Russia has become increasingly influential, not least in energy exports and criticism of prospective NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine (Chivvis and Rid 2009, p.108). To see such confidence in relations with war-time enemies indicates that, as long as international issues remain in a civilian rather than military context, Germany is far more comfortable and less gripped by negative historical memory. Even Israel, who Germany has been keen to support for obvious reasons, has seen the latter vote for Security Council resolutions objecting to settlements, and Angela Merkel has not been shy in scolding Netanyahu for failing to advance peace efforts (Sherwood 2011).

Historical memory is still hugely significant to German foreign and security policy, not least for shaping the German political-military culture following the war, which directly influenced the approaches to said policies. After decades of a multilateral, anti-militarist stance that has virtually become instinctive, it is little wonder that change comes cautiously. That historical memory retains a presence is clear, but the question now is to what extent it exercises a restrictive influence on Germany. As new generations emerge with little connection to the war and associated guilt, it is natural that historical memory's negative spell is weakening. It can be suggested that Germany went too far down the anti-militarist spectrum, so that perhaps now a necessary but slow-to-realise rebalancing is occurring as it recognises its role as a global player and is prepared to accept the foreign and security responsibilities that come with that. While Germany looks to the future however it will inevitably keep a keen eye on the past and, if not be permanently bound or constricted by historical memory, then at least be aware and respectful of the lessons it can impart for avoiding any possible return to militant nationalism or aggressive imposition of its will.

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