

**BRIDGING THE ODER:
REFLECTIONS ON POLAND, GERMANY, AND THE
TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE
PART II**

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In his recent book, Fritz Stern presents five Germanies that he has known. This made me realize that I have known three Germanies. I have known the old West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany), East Germany (the GDR), and the united Germany for the past sixteen years now. Each of these Germanies has in one way or another affected Poland and was connected to Poland in a positive, a negative, or, very often, an ambivalent way.

I want to start with one of these Germanies, the GDR, which seems today to be totally forgotten. This Germany was important because it was our immediate neighbor. This country was officially a friend; unofficially it was perceived as something terrifying. Even those who perceived the GDR as useful—and there were some—did it in a very ambivalent way, with distance or even with fear. Useful? You may wonder for what. There were two possibilities. One was that the GDR was useful as part of the Eastern Bloc; it was a sort of guarantor of the Eastern Bloc. So, for official Poland, the GDR was an important part of the status quo that they wanted to maintain. Even they did it with a certain distance and hesitation. For the others, the GDR was more of a buffer, separating Poland from what people considered the real Germany: West Germany, free Germany. Why did they want Poland to be separated from the real Germany? Because they simply did not trust the intentions of the real Germany. They believed that it possibly had revisionist intentions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Poland's relationship to the Federal Republic of Germany began to change. On the one hand, West Germany was admired for its economic success and also for its political success. The West German way of life as the Western way of life attracted many people in the 1970s. Hundreds of thousands of people left Poland for West Germany. However, even that was ambivalent because the only way to go to Germany, to be accepted in Germany, was to claim German roots. The new arrivals were accepted if they gave up their Polish identity and became German. In many cases, these were families that were of

German descent or had a double identity which made a decision to move easier. But in some cases it was simply the only way into the Western world, it was the only way to join the European Community on an individual basis, so to speak. On the other hand, fear of West Germany made many Poles back in the 1960s and 1970s accept the GDR, as I said, as a useful tool, but at a very high price. The GDR was a key part of the Eastern system, with the Soviet Union as the dominant superpower. In this way, the German problem, primarily because of the Oder-Neisse border, was part of the Polish problem, part of the problem of Poland's freedom and independence, part of the problem of a democratic Poland. In a broader sense, the Polish and German questions were at the very core of the European question, at the very core of the divided continent, of divided Europe.

In the 1970s and 1980s an important discussion started in Poland: a discussion about German unification. The outcome of the discussion was that the democratic opposition of the 1980s, which had started in the 1970s, overcame the fear of German unification. This was an important act of political and intellectual courage. It was based on the consideration that fear of West Germany and of German unification was pushing Poland toward the East, while accepting unification would open the way toward the West, toward becoming part of a free Europe. Fortunately, there were some people on the German side who recognized these encouraging signals from the Polish side and honored them. One of these people was the later minister of defense Volker Rühle. This was important because he is a politician of the German CDU. He was one of the few German politicians who recognized these signals and started a dialogue with the Polish opposition. Poland certainly had specific reasons to fear the unification of Germany. However, it should be remembered that there was widespread skepticism in Europe. All of Germany's neighbors—and not only its neighbors—were skeptical or fearful of German unification. I think what is important today is how fast and successfully, if not easily, Europeans overcame their fears and hesitations and accepted a unified Germany. It does not make sense to blame people for their hesitations back in 1989/90. The way Europeans welcomed united Germany is one of the most encouraging developments in Europe in the twentieth century. The only European power that accepted the idea of German unification without any hesitation was the United States, a European power in the political sense. Why the U.S.? For obvious reasons: The U.S. has been part of European history, but without sharing European historical obsessions, and that helped the U.S. take an unambiguous position toward German unification. The U.S. also does not have as long a memory as we do in Europe. That helped very much.

Where are we today? The best news today is that there is no “German question” in today’s Europe. If we look back where we were eighteen or twenty years ago, this is really great news. We may agree or disagree with this or that German government, we may quarrel (as we do sometimes) with the German government, but there is no German question in the traditional sense. Henry Kissinger once wrote that in modern European history there had always been the problem of Germany being either too weak or too strong, too small or too big for Europe. Today’s Germany is neither too weak nor too strong for Europe, it is part of Europe, and this is really something to appreciate. There are some people in Europe who claim that the relative economic weakness of Germany poses a threat to Europe, but this is very different from the problems caused by Germany in the past. There is no problem of war and peace in Europe linked with Germany as we know it from history. Without a doubt, in 1989/90 German unification disturbed the balance of power that was created after 1945. Even the internal balance of power in Western Europe was affected in certain ways. Look, for example, at Franco-German relations, where there was a certain equilibrium that was disturbed by unification, but this is not the same problem as we know it from history.

In 1989/90 there were fears that German unification might transform Europe into a playground for *Machtpolitik*, power politics. Interestingly, the Germans themselves did not even understand these fears and concerns because these fears were so distant from what the Germans were thinking, how they perceived their situation, how they articulated their interests in Europe. I remember a survey published in a German newspaper back in 1991. The result of this survey was that a vast majority of Germans thought the best model for a united Germany was Switzerland. Why Switzerland? Because it was neutral, harmonious, and it did not have to interact with the world. It was a certain escapism, but certainly not the traditional *machtpolitische* ambitions we knew from the past.

In Poland, too, the fears of 1989/90 are almost completely forgotten. Careful support for unified Germany by the then-opposition in the 1980s turned out to be a good investment in the future. Germany clearly facilitated Poland’s membership in the European Union and NATO. However, we have to recognize that the changes that started in 1989/90 have not been completed. It has been argued that German unification was not the merging of two countries, but the enlargement of West Germany. While there is some truth to this, unified Germany is not just a larger West Germany. Germany after unification is different from what West Germany was before 1990, just as the European Union after enlargement is different from what it was when it had just fifteen members.

Where is Europe heading today, with Germany and Poland in the heart of Europe? For several decades, Europe was absent from interna-

tional politics, and its absence was not considered a weakness, but a virtue. Europe was proud of being absent and not having to participate in international politics. This was the new European identity. Well, this does not work in today's world. Europe can no longer make use of this privilege. Europe has responsibilities that correspond to its economic, political, and military capabilities. Whereas the Cold War world had a consolidating effect on Europe, today's world has a potentially disintegrating effect on Europe unless it can organize itself and become a player in international politics. The question is how to organize Europe and how to cope with this responsibility.

For obvious reasons, no single country can provide leadership in today's Europe. Even the most powerful country cannot be the leader. In the past, Germany and France functioned as dual leaders of the old European Union. Today, we need a larger collective leadership in the European Union, but without strictly formalizing the group that makes up this leadership. Germany is an obvious candidate for this group. I think Poland should be part of this group as well, by virtue of its geography and its potential. This is why I believe there is a common mission for Poland and Germany. One of the reasons we need a common European policy is the eastern neighborhood. We need an "eastern policy" of the European Union. East of Poland—and thus east of the European Union—important geopolitical changes are taking place that will affect the whole of Europe. We have not only to respond to them but to shape them. This task can only be accomplished by Europe as a whole, not by a single European country. Germany and Poland are natural partners in shaping eastern policy because we have vital interests in this part of Europe. Generally, the further away to the east a country is, the less interest there is. Poland is an immediate neighbor. Germany is not far enough away to be indifferent. These two countries have vital interests in eastern policy. To be sure, there are differences in their perceptions, particularly in regard to Russia, which in turn have implications for attitudes toward Ukraine. Germany and Poland do not have identical interests in Eastern Europe, but they have no fundamental conflicts of interest in Eastern Europe. There are more commonalities than differences. One cannot expect Russia to help Europe get together because Russia is not interested in having one well-organized partner in Europe. Russia is more interested in playing countries in the European Union off one another. Gesine Schwan mentioned Ukraine as a field for Polish-German cooperation. I fully agree. However, first one would have to discuss the fundamental question of how to define Ukraine's position in Europe. There are two choices. Either Ukraine is an external partner and a partner in foreign policy or Ukraine is part of the European world and hence a partner in European enlargement policy. The choice makes all the difference be-

cause the European Union has been very successful in enlargement policy but is still very weak in foreign policy. If Ukraine is left to European foreign policy, it will be neglected; for Europe to engage Ukraine, Ukraine has to be declared a partner in enlargement policy, even knowing that it will take a very, very long time. We have to make this choice. What I have said indicates what I believe to be the right one.

There is, finally, another reason why I believe we need close Polish-German cooperation. I think, despite differences in public attitudes, we—elites and government, at least—agree that we need strong transatlantic ties, and that includes a strong American presence in Europe as an important part of an equilibrium in Europe and in the world. The United States has helped transform Europe. There is no reason to believe that Europe would be a safer place without the U.S. There is no reason to believe that we would be able to solve the problems we are facing—for example, in Eastern Europe—without cooperating with the United States. I think this is an important shared interest between Poland and Germany. Particularly now after the shift in Germany's foreign policy, we should exploit this shared interest, and we are encouraged to do so by our American friends.

In conclusion: In the early 1990s, two Americans who were involved in the process of German unification wrote a book entitled *Germany Unified, Europe Transformed*. Sixteen years later we know Germany is unified, but Europe is still being transformed. The question is still open: What sort of Europe will we get at the end of this transformation? Germany and Poland certainly are two countries that not only have to ask this question, but have to answer it. I remember that sixteen years ago, on October 3, 1990, I was standing on the stairs of the Reichstag near Hans Dietrich Genscher, then the foreign minister of Germany, and I was looking at the people in front of the Reichstag, hundreds of thousands of people. I had never seen so many German flags. I felt a new era was beginning. Everybody was asking how reunification was going to change Europe. It is not my task to judge whether these past sixteen years have been one of the best periods in German history, but I can say that they certainly have been one of the best periods in Poland's history.