



GERMANY IN THE 21ST CENTURY PART I: THE FOURTH REICH

By David Danelo



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In central Berlin, inside a German government building courtyard two blocks from the concrete catacombs of the Holocaust Memorial, five square meters of preserved barbed wire guards what appears to be a nondescript hill. According to a sign, the serrated metal marks the corner of the Führerbunker's exterior perimeter; this jagged mound of dirt was where Nazi Germany fought its last stand. On April 30, 1945, inside the underground command post 100 meters from this hill, Adolf Hitler shot himself, hastening World War II to its end. Although the formal surrender would not come until days later, the Third Reich fell when Hitler died, marking the start of Germany's forty-plus year partition. Twenty years after Hitler's defeat, the Berlin Wall ran through the bunker complex; the East German government destroyed most of the buildings and left the rest in disrepair. Today, as with most of Berlin's 20th century landmarks, the Führerbunker is a tourist attraction.



As thousands of international visitors examine Germany's past each day, Berlin—and the German people—are left with the perpetual question of their future. In contrast to the previous era's militarism, a new German reign has emerged in 21st century Europe. And unlike the 20th century rule, this economic, social, and political regnum has been benignly, and even enthusiastically, embraced by immediate neighbors. Timed with the global commemoration of the 70th anniversary of World War II's end, this three-part article series highlights the special role Germany has come to play in transatlantic foreign policy.

The rapid ascent of Berlin's fortunes alongside Western Europe's approval has surprised Europe, and Germans themselves. At the new millennium's dawn, reunification's high costs left Germany designated as the "sick man of Europe," a moniker Russian Czar Nicholas I originally applied to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. After World War II, the title was subsequently distributed around the continent to describe whichever country seemed taken with momentary malaise. In 1990, facing the question of unifying East and West Germany, and recovering from its own economic woes in the previous decades, World War II's victors and victims feared what unity could bring. France and Great Britain were against a united Germany, and Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers reflected the national mood of the Netherlands when he questioned Germany's right to self-determination. In the late 1990s, as Germany struggled under the weight of what eventually became an estimated \$2 trillion in reunification costs, Western Europe felt a measure of *schadenfreude* in Deutschland's economic woes.

Having led the European Union out of the last decade's global financial crisis, Germany stands in 2015 as Europe's dominant continental power—healthy, strong, and yet conflicted about the leadership role that geography has fated for them. Although Southern Europe in general, and Greece in particular, now resists Germany's austerity policies, Berlin's voice remains the most important inside European Union economic debates—a leadership mandate from immediate neighbors freely granted and embraced at levels of enthusiasm not seen in over a century. Additionally—and often forgotten in policy discussions across the Atlantic—Germany, whose amnesty laws are, after Sweden, the most welcoming in Europe, has become the continent's prime 21st century migrant destination for those who survive the journey north and west. The likely demographic and cultural change that migration will bring Germany forecasts internal social conflict, but might also come to prove a model of social integration.

A deeper examination on the emphasis in German policy to achieve social harmony following World War II's horrors offers insight for Americans into issues ranging from Germany's response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine to migration policy of asylum seekers from North Africa and the Middle East. A principal advocate against either arming Ukrainian government forces or otherwise intervening in the conflict, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has received accolades in Europe's negotiating halls and streets for what continental leaders call balanced, prudent leadership. At the same time, public support for any military commitment beyond NATO appears scant to nonexistent. "Of course we are not going to want to send troops into Ukraine," a Merkel supporter told me. "We had our war. Who are we going to fight, a million Russians?" Indeed, Germans did not express a strong outcry when Russia annexed Crimea; Berlin's own borders have changed dramatically over the decades, and, although Putin's aggression was troubling, Germans were more inclined to view the transition in practical terms, as correcting a historical anomaly.

This view changed significantly in June 2014, after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over Ukrainian territory. Now 80 percent of Germans say they "don't trust Russia," and local humanitarian organizations to send aid to Ukraine have been well-funded by German donations. In March 2015, German human rights activists hung a huge Ukrainian flag from the museum at Checkpoint Charlie, Germany's most-visited tourist attraction. Support for "the liberty and unity of Ukraine," as the sign on the flag reads both in English and Cyrillic, appears to run high in Germany. The banner hangs above the NATO flag, and, notably, the four flags of Berlin's post-World War II occupiers.



At the same time, German awareness of official Ukrainian involvement—regardless of the justification—with embracing neo-Nazi ideology engenders high levels of skepticism towards either direct or indirect involvement in war with Russia over Ukraine. By supporting Ukraine’s “liberty and unity” as a matter of human rights rhetoric, Germans can also take pride in their own recent history, rather than having to stare too long at the haunting demons of their past—a past which still maintains a presence in more than a handful of German hearts and minds. Chancellor Merkel’s vocal repudiation of PEGIDA, a right wing anti-immigrant political organization that—like Ukraine’s Right Sector—brandishes the Nazi red and black as its colors, is as much a political statement against neo-Nazism throughout the continent as an internal German political debate. Exterminating, or at least defeating, neo-Nazi ideology is a responsibility Germans are taught to take personally, lest the past’s demons rise again.

Though popular in Europe, Merkel’s position has come under fire in the United States. American politicians in both major parties have labelled her stance tepid, particularly as Russia’s economy has weakened from economic sanctions and falling oil prices. In the American view, Germany—and all of Berlin’s immediate NATO neighbors—have been freeloading on U.S. taxpayer-funded defense resources for too long, in part bankrolling the region’s economic stability. Regardless of the deeply ingrained German skepticism about the value of offensive military force, Americans might say, Berlin must focus on the future.

Despite America’s forward-looking urges, European support for Merkel’s position stems less from a concern about escalating war with Russia than from a collective fear of enabling the rise of right-wing populism. And German concerns about inadvertently supporting National Socialism by arming Ukrainian rebels are not without cause. Andriy Belitsky and Dmytro Yarosh, leaders of, respectively, Ukraine’s volunteer Azov and Aydar Battalions, were both elected to Ukraine’s Parliament despite having previously embraced neo-Fascist rhetoric. Both battalions are partisans of Right Sector, an ultra-nationalist political party, and brandish coded Aryan symbols. Multiple Western reports have documented their neo-Nazi culture, which provides daily fodder for Russian media.

Yet the volunteers have fought aggressively, and successfully, against Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. With Ukraine’s army lacking sufficient forces, both battalions have been formally adopted into Ukraine’s military structure. Yarosh—despite being on an Interpol wanted list (at Russia’s request) for terrorism incitement—was appointed a senior advisor to Ukraine’s defense minister in mid-April. At the same time, 300 U.S. Army soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade began training exercises with the Azov Battalion.

Although Russian propaganda dramatically enhances the neo-Nazi influence on Ukraine's government and policy, the emotional impact of such symbols—especially when tattooed on a shoulder, patched on a uniform, or drawn on a mortar tube—weigh far more heavily in Germany than across the Atlantic. Americans often assume that Germany's calculus for caution in taking sides against Russia stems purely from rational, economic considerations: Berlin needs Moscow's natural gas and seeks to maintain an \$80 billion trade relationship that makes Russia a prime market for Germany's manufactured goods. But Germany's cautious impulses are not because of an unwillingness to endure national sacrifice, but out of aversion to giving rise to anything resembling the Third Reich's national trauma.

Despite the impulse to defend human rights, Berlin sees deterring Moscow as both a permanent and situational requirement; a function of an enduring struggle for control of the "world island," as Sir Alfred Mackinder described Eurasia, as well as a spiritual culture war between a clash of values—the secular, metrosexual, atheist, effete, cosmopolitan Western Europeans versus the traditional, patriarchal, Orthodox, hyper-masculine, and rugged Russians. During a visit to Odessa, Ukraine, the week Crimea was officially annexed, a Ukrainian asked me if I knew how to tell the difference between cities designed by Western Europeans and those built under Czarist influence. "European towns were built with a clock in the center of the square," my colleague said. "Cities built under the Russians were constructed around a church." The anecdote seemed less about factual accuracy—I'm certain architectural scholars and historians can identify Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant cities throughout Europe that don't fit that description—than about perception. My Ukrainian friend understood Europe to stand for modernity and Russia to embrace mysticism; the analogy was intended to present the paradox between the cultural struggles that seem, in Ukraine in general and Eurasia in particular, more profoundly enduring than even ethnic or linguistic differences.

It is the prospect of a lengthy violent struggle between these cultural factors—between Ukrainian warriors embracing the fascism they see in Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Russian partisans spiritually compelled to defend their motherland—that appears to weigh heaviest on the German consciousness when deciding how to handle Russia. In the United States, culture wars are metaphors for political conflict; Germans need only to reflect on their recent past to see what can happen when strident ideologies clash. And today, with approximately 28,000 German neo-Nazi sympathizers reportedly registered in a national watch list (compared to 800 potential Islamic militants), Germans fear the prospect of fascist chickens coming home to roost far more than Russian troops on their doorstep should Berlin militarily support Kyiv. Germany does not appear afraid of Russia's threats as much as the possibility of what raising an army, sending weapons, and militarily restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine could do to themselves.

Although history and geography have fated Germany and Russia to clash, memories of the carnage wrought from their most recent war are far too fresh for Merkel to have any interest in drawing a red line over Ukraine. The German Defense Ministry's recent decision to restore 100 Leopard 2 main battle tanks to the nation's arsenal—at NATO's request—highlights Germany's view of its own overall importance in maintaining the continent's security, stability, and resilience against Russian aggression. But having taken seventy years to achieve good neighbor status, Germans have been confronted with so much recent change that the risks of continental leadership occasionally appear to outweigh the rewards. Achieving the status quo as first among European equals was no easy task for Deutschland, and, as we will see through a look at Germany through the eyes of the Netherlands, bring its own challenges.