

Promised Land?

The headlong rush towards the unification of Germany has aroused mixed emotions in many parts of Europe. Hope is tinged with old fears. Could history repeat itself? **Richard Evans** analyses the phenomenon of German nationalism

German reunification is causing a lot of anxiety in the world. The sight of vast crowds in Leipzig waving the national flag and roaring for 'Deutschland, einig Vaterland!' - 'Germany, united fatherland!' - awakens uncomfortable memories of the nationalist enthusiasms of the past. Chancellor Kohl's evident reluctance to acknowledge the validity of the present Polish-German border, the Oder-Neisse line, until forced to by his liberal coalition partners and by hostile international opinion has aroused the suspicion that a united Germany might look for territorial gains in the East, at a time when an economically shattered country such as Poland hardly seems in a position to resist whatever pressure the new colossus in central Europe might bring to bear. National feeling is reviving all over central and Eastern Europe, and the violence to which it has already given rise in a number of areas, from Azerbaijan to Bulgaria, is grimly suggestive of the emotive power which nationalism still possesses as the 20th century draws to a close.

And there can surely be no doubt any more of the strength and resilience of feelings of national identity in Germany itself. Only a couple of years ago, observers were proclaiming Germany to be a 'post-national' society, where local and regional identities and a general feeling of being European had largely superseded the national identification of the past. Opinion polls showed that only a minority of West Germans were proud of being German, in stark contrast to the strong feelings of national pride recorded by the pollsters in Britain or, still more, the USA. West German conservatives were lamenting the

loss of national identity and orientation among the populace and trying to revive it by arguing for a more positive attitude towards the German past. The question of reunification figured well down the list of political issues which West Germans identified as urgent or important.

In the East, the Honecker regime was busy trying to create a separate sense of national identity through inventing a separate historical tradition for the regions which it occupied. Martin Luther, who was the subject of massive anniversary celebrations in 1983, Prussian heroes such as Frederick the Great, whose statue was reinstated on East Berlin's main boulevard, the Unter den Linden, and even Bismarck, the subject of a major, and surprisingly conventional, biography by a leading East German a couple of years ago, were retrospectively turned into East Germans by virtue of the fact that they had lived or worked in areas subsequently occupied by the territory of the GDR. Popular identification with the country was supposed to be cemented by the massive investment in sporting prowess that earned East Germans so many Olympic medals in the Honecker years. And when the revolution began, last October and November, opposition groups such as the New Forum seemed clear that what they wanted was the democratisation of their own country, not unification with another.

How illusory all that seems now! All Honecker's commemorations of historical figures like Luther seems to have done is to reinforce a sense of shared cultural heritage with the rest of Germany. And attitudes to the GDR's sporting heroes seems to have varied between sympathy at the regime of drug-

taking to which so many of them were made to submit, to resentment at the extensive privileges which this enabled them to enjoy. Observers were not wholly wrong to recognise a sense of a separate identity among East Germans, but in retrospect it is clear that it ran no more than skin deep. Already in 1989 a third of a million East Germans left for the West; and in 1990 emigration has so far been running at around 60,000 people a month, a rate that, if sustained to the end of the year, would mean that roughly a million people, or one-sixteenth of the entire population, will have crossed the border to settle in the Federal Republic in the space of 24 months. An even larger number of ethnic Germans - over 370,000 - emigrated to West Germany from other parts of Eastern Europe in 1989, and this wave of migration is continuing too. Clearly there is a powerful sense of national identity at work: it is, after all, *Germany* they are going to live in, not Austria or Switzerland or the European Community.

Yet it would be wrong to see this undoubted sense of national identity as a simple gut feeling of ethnicity. Far from being innate or unchanging, national feeling has been historically mutable and contingent. And of nowhere has this been more true than of Germany. Different variants and traditions of German nationalism have long existed side by side and come to the fore at various different conjunctures. While they have always overlapped, they have seldom been identical. Cultural nationalism, economic nationalism and political nationalism have had widely varying implications in Germany over the past two centuries. Political nationalism itself has found many competing forms, varying from ultra-liberal to extreme reactionary. The Nazi or pan-German variant that reached its apogee under Hitler has been only one of these. Moreover, even the definition of who is German has changed over time and been a matter of frequent dispute among nationalists.

So it would be a mistake to regard those powerful images of German nationalism which the newsreel propaganda of the Nazi era has stamped on the international public memory as accurate representations of reality. After all, one of the most memorable of such images was that of the cheering crowds who greeted Hitler as he drove into Austria after the *Anschluss* of 1938. At that time, certainly, a great many Austrians did consider themselves German and welcomed their incorporation into the Reich, even if those who disagreed with this view stayed at home. Yet scarcely anyone would now suggest that German reunification should include Austria, despite the fact that, historically speaking, Austria did form part of the German Confederation from 1815 to 1866 and before that part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, as it was called. The long tradition of a 'big German' sense of national identity,

Unification Of Germany, 1871



The outer dotted line indicates the border of Germany after the Franco-Prussian War 1870-1. It shows the newly unified Germany as made up of many different states.

The Two Germanys, 1990



The map shows the borders of West and East Germany, including the Oder-Neisse Line between East Germany and Poland. The shaded parts of Poland and the USSR are those which the far Right in Germany wants to recover.

including Austria, came to an end during and after the second world war.

But the idea of German national identity has been historically contingent and mutable in other ways too. In literature, culture and the arts, for example, it may still be said to move rather freely across national political boundaries. A conductor like Herbert von Karajan was

equally at home in Berlin and Salzburg, a writer like Peter Handke is not merely Austrian, any more that a playwright like Max Frisch is primarily Swiss. That is not to deny, of course, that the literary and artistic culture of a country such as Austria has its own individuality, especially when it turns, as for example in the work of Thomas Bernhard, in a political direction. But it is

clearly the case that in a wider sense the German-speaking countries continue to share a common cultural heritage and a common cultural context, even where - as in East Germany until very recently - this has been grossly deformed by the pressures of political and ideological censorship and indoctrination. This has as few implications for a *political* sense of identity, however, as the common cultural heritage of the English-speaking nations does.

Yet the political resonances of a shared culture in this sense were of profound importance to the emergent nationalist movement of the early-19th century. As the culminating point of that movement showed, in the revolution of 1848, German nationalism was initially a radical and progressive phenomenon. Feudalism, serfdom, the denial of civil liberties to minorities such as the Jews, censorship, the police state, the refusal to contemplate free elections and parliamentary rule - all these were associated with the 40-odd individual and autonomous states, ranging from Austria and Prussia at one extreme to Mecklenburg and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt at the other, into which the German Confederation was divided. Abolishing them all and creating a unitary national state with a single, sovereign parliament seemed the quickest way to gain the classic freedoms which the men of 1848 were so committed to winning for the German people. Marx and Engels, too, saw a unified nation as the essential basis for historical progress at this time.

It was only with the political failure of the 1848 revolution and the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership, achieved by Bismarck's wars of 1864, 1866 and 1870-71, that German nationalism began to take on a different character. Of course, liberal nationalism did not die immediately; and the 1870s in particular saw a number of important liberal reforms which had been undoubtedly made easier by the achievement of unification. But as time went on, both Bismarck and the liberal nationalists began to look for the consolidation of national unity through the suppression of the alleged 'enemies of the Reich' within the new German Empire. In the 1870s Germany's large Catholic minority, mostly concentrated in parts of Germany which had fought on the Austrian side against Prussia in 1866, was subjected to harsh measures of discrimination during the so-called *Kulturkampf*. In 1878 it was the turn of the socialist labour movement, and even after the lifting of the formal ban on its organisations in 1890, it continued to be subject to police harassment, prosecution and censorship. By this time the national minorities which lived within Germany's borders, most notably the Poles, were also falling victim to the Germanising zeal of the authorities, backed up by the nationalist wings of the liberals.

German nationalism's move from left

'Only a couple of years ago, observers were proclaiming Germany to be a "post-national" society'



to right was completed around the turn of the century by the emergence of two new factors. First, the military might behind the creation of the German Empire under Bismarck was transformed into a bid for world-power status, backed by the construction of a big navy; and secondly, state nationalism began to be outflanked by a new, populist nationalism, fuelled by petty-bourgeois resentments and strongly coloured by anti-semitism. The most radical of the new nationalists regarded the work of unification as incomplete, and pointed to the many millions of Germans living outside the boundaries of the Reich, in Eastern Europe. Here it was not so much cultural nationalism as racism that provided the impulse behind this 'pan-German' programme for the eastern extension of Germany's boundaries.

Pan-Germanism remained a minority current before 1914. It was after the war that the real radicalisation of German nationalism took place. With the rise of the Nazi Party came the assertion of the view, held only by a tiny minority of pan-Germans before 1914, that the Germans were a superior race whose destiny lay in uniting themselves in a huge central European empire where they would dominate and enslave millions of supposedly inferior races such as the Slavs. These beliefs, fed by a growing quantity of historical and scientific, or pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific, publications on the historic mission of the Germans and the eugenic inferiority of Poles, Russians and Jews, found their most terrible expression in the war of conquest and extermination launched by Hitler against the East in 1941.

It was the unfolding of this last and most radical transformation of political nationalism in Germany that provided the essential precondition for the dismemberment of the Reich after the war. The boundaries existing in 1937, before Hitler began his wars of conquest and annexation, were drastically revised and many areas of eastern Germany then inside the Reich were taken over by Poland and the Soviet Union. Some 11m ethnic Germans fled to the West or were brutally expelled, with severe loss of life. In retrospect, this flood of German refugees and expellees was the first, and by far the most dramatic, act in a process of concentrating the Germans within a single set of state boundaries that has re-emerged in the last couple of years with the renewed influx of ethnic German refugees from Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union. Whereas pan-German and Nazi notions of national identity meant, among other things, *extending* Germany's state boundaries to cover major areas of German (and Slav) settlements in the East, the predominant postwar notion of national identity has meant the opposite: bringing Germans from those areas back into the much-diminished boundaries of the German state as it now exists.

'The real force undermining the viability of East Germany as an independent state has been economic'



Relatively few ethnic Germans now remain in the East. The thorough and long-established integration of the first, postwar wave of refugees and expellees into the West makes it seem unlikely that there would be much support for a revival of pan-German annexationism. But the reunification of East and West Germany is a rather different matter. Although, obviously, the division of Germany into zones of occupation in 1945 would never have happened but for the war started by Hitler in 1939, the hardening of the boundary between the Soviet zone and the three Western zones into a boundary between two separate states was above all the legacy of the cold war. As the cold war ends that legacy is now being liquidated. Despite Chancellor Kohl's hesitations about recognising the Polish-German border established in 1945, however, the likelihood of a united Germany making claims on the territory given by international agreement to Poland seems relatively remote. Both internal and external political resistance to such an ambition is considerable. In the end, unlike the effects of the cold war, the effects of second world war are simply too profound to be reversed.

This still leaves us with the question of what kind of national identity it is that the Germans are now forging for themselves. If radical, pan-German nationalism is now confined to fringe groups of the far Right such as Franz Schonhuber's Republicans, then what kind of nationalism are we dealing with? There is much to be said for taking an optimistic view, and for believing that what we are witnessing is a revival under modern auspices of the liberal nationalism of the 19th century, though largely shorn of its linkage to the idea of a shared literary and linguistic culture. This can be seen in the relinking of the idea of national unity to freedom, civil rights and democracy. It is important in this context to remember where the impulse for change has come from. It has been almost exclusively from the popular revolution in the East, led by young people whose political background is to be found in the opposition movements that were beginning to emerge in the last years of Honecker's rule: in movements centred on the Protestant Church, in demonstrations to change 'swords into ploughshares', in the campaign for non-military alternatives to conscription into the East German People's Army, in the growing protests against the appalling environmental pollution produced by the regime's reckless drive to increase industrial production. The moral outrage that overthrew the Krenz regime and destroyed the East German Communist Party when it was discovered that its leaders, such as Erich Honecker, had been leading a life of luxury while extolling to the people the virtues of socialist equality, derived its cutting edge from the moral, and sometimes religious, imperatives behind these opposition

movements.

The idealism of the youthful revolutionaries in the East is indeed strikingly reminiscent of the idealism of the liberal nationalists of 1848. But as in 1848, this has its problems. For as West German big business muscles in on the East, and as the professional politicians from the Federal Republic move in to dominate the course of events during the election campaign, it is hard not to see the idealists of the New Forum and the other home-grown movements that led the revolution of November and December 1989 as naive amateurs helpless before the realities of power. German unification, after all, is no marriage between equals. One of the two or three richest countries in the world is merging with one of the most crisis-ridden economies in Europe.

What is happening, in fact, is the re-emergence of yet another strand in the complex history of German national identity: economic nationalism. Back in the early 19th century, the emerging middle classes saw economic unification as the essential foundation for industrial growth and prosperity. The famous customs union or *Zollverein* brought the German states together in a single market long before they were politically united. And in the depths of the slump, in 1931, the German and Austrian governments once again saw economic union between the two countries as a way towards economic revival - a plan that was only stopped from becoming reality by the intervention of suspicious Western allies, who feared it would lead soon enough to political union as well.

Freedom and democracy were the political imperatives behind the political revolution in East Germany; a sense of national identity with Germans in the West drove on the crowds in Leipzig to raise the demand for reunification; but the real force undermining the viability of East Germany as an independent state has been economic. The more people have fled to the West in search of a better life, the more difficult has become the situation of those who have stayed behind. Factories are losing their skilled workers; hospitals and schools are finding it more and more difficult to provide basic services in the absence of growing numbers of doctors, nurses and teachers; the service and supply sectors are experiencing ever more serious problems in coping. The East German people have seen the affluent style of life available in the West, and they want it for themselves. As the situation in the East has grown more dire by the week, so economic union with the West has come to seem the only way out.

But the irony is that the drive for economic unification has met with an increasingly hostile response from the people of the Federal Republic. It is all very well for people to support the idea of reunification in the abstract, as a principle, and the percentage of West

Germans who have done so, according to the opinion polls, has increased from under half last autumn to 75% by the early spring. But as the real costs of reunification have become steadily more apparent, so West Germans have been turning against the idea in practice. By February 1990, opinion surveys were showing massive majorities against raising West German taxes or cutting wages in order to help the East, while the proportion of those in favour of continuing to admit refugees from the East and paying them full social benefits had dropped to little more than a fifth. The social-democratic politician Oskar Lafontaine was at the time of writing racing ahead of Chancellor Kohl in the opinion polls with his calls for a stop to immigration from the East and a slowing-down of Kohl's headlong drive to reunify.

National identity is all very well for the West Germans, in other words, as long as it does not mean having to accommodate millions of refugees in their towns and cities or pay out billions of marks to aid the recovery of the East German economy to an extent that people might actually want to stay there. Hostility to Easterners is growing rapidly on the streets and in the pubs and bars of Hamburg, Munich and West Berlin, and it is one of the many ironies of the situation that the far-right, ultra-nationalist Republicans are second to none in their condemnation of the influx.

All of this seems rather a long way from the rabid pan-Germanism that led to the second world war. History, as everyone knows, never really repeats itself, not even the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Nationalism and national identity are changeable, historically contingent, fractured and un-even phenomena. Being German means different things to different people at different times, just as being British or French does. Many of the social forces that nourished extreme German nationalism in the earlier parts of this century, from a large and resentful Prot-estant peasantry and urban petty-bourgeoisie to a rigidly monarchist and authoritarian aristocracy and military elite, are now vanished or dwindled into insignificance. The seismic shock of total defeat in the second world war has convinced the bulk of the middle classes that political adventurism and foreign expansionism are best avoided. Democracy has brought prosperity, and therefore seems a good thing to most people.

The real issues at stake in Germany are far removed from the kind of historically conditioned anxieties so often expressed outside. How is the exodus from the East to be stopped without serious infringements of human rights? How is the East's economy to be revived without lowering living standards or undermining the costly welfare state in East and West? How are latent antagonisms and social conflicts between

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Easterners and Westerners to be avoided? And are the millions of East Germans who supported Chancellor Kohl's line of immediate reunification by voting for the Conservative Alliance in the March 18 elections going to be disappointed if reunification fails to bring the rapid economic benefits that they were looking for and are being promised? Aggressive nationalism has come to the fore in Germany at times of economic crisis and collapse, most notably in the early 1930s, and if the West German economy gets into serious trouble during the process of adjustment, then it may re-emerge. But it is very unlikely to take the kind of shape it had earlier in the century: much more likely, for example, would be a growth in anti-immigrant feeling directed against the large communities of Turks and others who have settled in Germany's major cities. There are no signs that German nationalism is likely to direct itself outwards again. On the contrary, there is a widespread feeling that reunification can only take place within the context of general European co-operation, above all in the European Community.

Events continue to move with such speed that nobody can be really sure what is going to happen next. But historical experience as well as common-sense observation suggests that alarmism is out of place, and a note of cautious optimism would be the most appropriate one to sound.

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