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SEMINAR ON GERMANY: SUMMARY RECORD

Introduction

The Prime Minister said that Europe had come to the end of the post-war period. Important decisions and choices about its future lay ahead. She herself had a number of crucial meetings in the weeks ahead, with President Bush, President Gorbachev, and Chancellor Kohl, as well as an informal EC Summit. In all of these, German unification would be the main issue. We needed to reach an assessment of what a united Germany would be like. History was a guide, but one could not just extrapolate. We also had to devise a framework for Europe's future, taking account of German unification and the sweeping changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was important to get the balance right between the lessons of the past and the opportunities of the future. She would welcome the wisdom and advice of those present.

Who are the Germans?

We started by talking about the Germans themselves and their characteristics. Like other nations, they had certain characteristics, which you could identify from the past and expect to find in the future. It was easier - and more pertinent to the present discussion - to think of the less happy ones: their insensitivity to the feelings of others (most noticeable in their behaviour over the Polish border), their obsession with themselves, a strong inclination to self-pity, and a longing to be liked. Some even less flattering attributes were also mentioned as an abiding part of the German character: in alphabetical order, angst, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, sentimentality.

Two further aspects of the German character were cited as reasons for concern about the future. First, a capacity for excess, to overdo things, to kick over the traces. Second, a tendency to over-estimate their own strengths and capabilities. An example of that, which had influenced much of Germany's subsequent history, was the conviction that their victory over

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France in 1870 stemmed from deep moral and cultural superiority rather than - as in fact - a modest advance in military technology.

Have the Germans changed?

It was as well to be aware of all these characteristics. But there was a strong school of thought among those present that today's Germans were very different from their predecessors. It was argued that our basic perception of Germans related to a period of German history running from Bismarck until 1945. This was the phase of imperial Germany, characterised by neurotic self-assertiveness, a high birth-rate, a closed economy, a chauvinist culture. It had not been greatly affected by defeat in 1918, which had been regarded in Germany as unfair. German attitudes, German teaching, German historiography all continued virtually unchanged after 1918, together with a sense of Germany's historic mission (which was why the German aristocracy had supported Hitler, even while regarding him as a vulgarian). But 1945 was quite different and marked a sea-change. There was no longer a sense of historic mission, no ambitions for physical conquest, no more militarism. Education and the writing of history had changed. The institutions were different. Democracy was deeply rooted. There was an innocence of and about the past on the part of the new generation of Germans. We should have no real worries about them.

This view was not accepted by everyone. It still had to be asked how a cultured and cultivated nation had allowed itself to be brain-washed into barbarism. If it had happened once, could it not happen again? Apprehension about Germany did not relate just to the Nazi period, but to the whole post-Bismarckian era, and inevitably caused deep distrust. The way in which the Germans currently used their elbows and threw their weight about in the European Community suggested that a lot had still not changed. While we all admired and indeed envied what the Germans had achieved in the last 45 years, the fact was that their institutions had not yet been seriously tested by adversity such as a major economic calamity. We could not tell how Germans would react in such circumstances. In sum, no-one had serious

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misgivings about the present leaders or political elite of Germany. But what about ten, fifteen or twenty years from now? Could some of the unhappy characteristics of the past re-emerge with just as destructive consequences?

What will be the consequences of reunification?

We looked more closely at two particular aspects of the future: the consequences of unification and Germany's role in Eastern Europe.

Even those most disposed to look on the bright side admitted to some qualms about what unification would mean for German behaviour in Europe. We could not expect a United Germany to think and act in exactly the same way as the Federal Republic which we had known for the last forty-five years - and this would be true even though a united Germany would almost certainly inherit the FRG's institutions. The Germans would not necessarily think more dangerously, but they would think differently. There was already evident a kind of triumphalism in German thinking and attitudes which would be uncomfortable for the rest of us. Reference was also made to Gunter Grass' comment: in the end reunification will get everyone against us, and we all know what happens when people are against us.

Then, too, there were reasons to worry about the effects on the character of a united Germany of bringing in 17 million predominantly Protestant North Germans brought up under a mendacious orthodoxy. How would this alter the basically Catholic Rhineland bias of the post-war FRG, with its political and economic centre of gravity increasingly in the South and West? We could not assume that a united Germany would fit quite so comfortably into Western Europe as the FRG. There would be a growing inclination to resurrect the concept of Mittel-Europa, with Germany's role being that of broker between East and West. It was noticeable that Chancellor Kohl now spoke of Germany's partners in East and West.

That tendency could be strengthened by the effect of unification on Germany's party system. The vote for the conservative alliance in East Germany could be seen as a vote for

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quick unification rather than for the values and policies of the West German CDU. There was a strong pacifist, neutralist, anti-nuclear constituency in East Germany, which could have a considerable effect on the views of a united Germany. That effect could be to make a united Germany both less 'western' and less politically stable than the FRG. At worst, the extremes at both ends of the political spectrum could grow in influence, leading to a return to Weimar politics (although no-one argued this with any great conviction).

Will a united Germany aspire to dominate Eastern Europe?

This led on naturally enough to debate about a united Germany's likely role and ambitions in Eastern Europe. It was widely agreed that Chancellor Kohl's handling of the Polish border issue, in particular his reference to the need to protect the German minority in Silesia, had given the wrong signals. Historic fears about Germany's 'mission' in Eastern and Central Europe had been revived. Some of President von Weizsacker's comments had contributed to this.

But the facts were more reassuring. The German minorities in Eastern Europe were much reduced in number, and the ambition of most of them was to move within the borders of Germany rather than have the borders of Germany come to them. The Germans' own interest lay in keeping the minorities where they were rather than in encouraging their return. They thus had an incentive to give substantial aid to Eastern Europe. There was no evidence that Germany was likely to make territorial claims, at least for the foreseeable future. To the extent that border problems might arise, it would be as a result of comparatively wealthy Germans buying land and property in poorer Poland and Czechoslovakia (bearing in mind that the Polish border would be only 40 minutes drive from the assumed capital of a united Germany).

More widely, it was likely that Germany would indeed dominate Eastern and Central Europe economically. But that did not necessarily equate to subjugation. Nor did it mean that a united Germany would achieve by economic means what Hitler had

failed to achieve militarily. There were undoubtedly still some who believed that Germany had a 'civilizing mission' to the East. But the fact was, the pressure for a German economic presence came as much from the East Europeans themselves as from the Germans. They wanted and needed German help and German investment: indeed it was probably the only way to restore and revive Eastern Europe ("There is only one thing worse than being exploited, and that is not being exploited"). It might indeed be ironic that after 1945 Eastern Europe had set out to avoid ever again being dependent on Germany, but after 45 years of Communism was more dependent than ever. But it was nonetheless a fact. The East Europeans might prefer a British or French presence. But neither was prepared to commit adequate resources.

What sort of framework should we build for the future?

Given that a much larger and more powerful Germany would soon be upon us, we had to consider what sort of European framework would be most likely to encourage the benign effects and diminish the adverse consequences.

The East/West aspects roused the greatest concern. There was a tendency on the part of the Germans to take the credit for unification themselves. In fact the real credit should go to the people of Eastern Europe and to Mr. Gorbachev. They were the ones who created the conditions in which unification could happen. Whatever solutions we adopted - whether in relation to Germany or to the current problems in Lithuania - must take account of their interests, and above all of Mr. Gorbachev's position. That would affect in particular the security arrangements made for the territory of the former GDR in a united Germany. We could not just shove the Russian troops out.

To an extent Soviet and East European interests paralleled those of Western Europe. We wanted Germany to be constrained within a security framework which had the best chance of avoiding a resurgence of German militarism. We wanted a continuing American military presence in Europe as a balance to Germany's power. We would want to see limits, preferably self-imposed through a further CFE agreement, on the size of Germany's armed

forces. We would want a renewed self-denying ordinance on acquisition by Germany of nuclear and chemical weapons. We would want to involve the Soviet Union institutionally in discussions of Europe's future security through the CSCE, not least because in the long term (and assuming continued development in the direction of democracy) the Soviet Union would be the only European power capable of balancing Germany.

All that would suggest that an accommodation could be found which would enable a united Germany to remain in NATO, with transitional arrangements to permit the Soviet Union to help keep forces in East Germany. It would also favour building up the CSCE (and possibly giving it a directorate based on the Five). The idea that a united Germany might be a member both of NATO and the Warsaw Pact simultaneously was also canvassed, but given short shrift.

But there were real risks that the situation could develop differently. One was that Gorbachev would be manoeuvred into using force in Lithuania or in some analagous situation: or that his failure to do would lead to his replacement by a much less moderate leadership. That risk was one reason why it was so important to hold on to the existing structure of NATO: the fact that things had gone the West's way for the last year or so did not absolve us from continuing to guard against something worse.

Another and possibly more likely danger was that the Soviet Union would exploit discussion in the Four plus Two group of a united Germany's membership of NATO and the presence of nuclear weapons in Germany, so that they became issues in the West German election campaign. German public opinion was seen as vulnerable on both points, but particularly on the nuclear issue. The worst fear was that NATO could unravel on the election hustings of Germany. The more positive view argued that this danger only underlined the importance of settling the question of a united Germany's membership of NATO as rapidly and decisively as possible.

Looking longer-term, the aim of building up the CSCE seemed sensible to everyone, not least as a way of managing and

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conciliating disputes between national minorities in Eastern and Central Europe.

The European Community was surprisingly not much mentioned. German behaviour in the EC - 'we pay so we must have our way' - was seen by some as the harbinger of Germany's economic dominance over Western Europe. There were differing views over how genuine the Germans were in saying they wanted a more integrated Europe in parallel with unification. Was it just a tactic to reassure others? Or a genuine desire to subsume the latent nationalist drive of a united Germany into something broader? The latter was not wholly convincing, given that the structure of the EC tended to favour German dominance, particularly in the monetary area. Against this, it was pointed out that the more assertive Germany became, the easier it ought to become to construct alliances against Germany on specific issues in the Community.

Conclusions

Where did this leave us? No formal conclusions were drawn. The weight of the evidence and the argument favoured those who were optimistic about life with a united Germany. We were reminded that in 1945 our aim had been a united Germany shorn of its eastern provinces but under democratic and non-communist government, with the states of Eastern Europe free to choose their own governments. We had failed to get that in 1945, but had won it now. Far from being agitated, we ought to be pleased. We were also reminded that Anglo-German antagonism since the fall of Bismarck had been injurious to Europe as a whole and must not be allowed to revive once more. When it came to failings and unhelpful characteristics, the Germans had their share and perhaps more: but in contrast to the past, they were much readier to recognise and admit this themselves.

The overall message was unmistakable: we should be nice to the Germans. But even the optimists had some unease, not for the present and the immediate future, but for what might lie further down the road than we can yet see.

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