

They Have to Be Better Than Good

GERMANY TODAY

A Personal Report.
By Walter Laqueur.
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By Josef Joffe

JUST when we thought that the "German question" was definitely dead, it returned in a new guise, and with a vengeance. For decades, the world had been accustomed to look at the Federal Republic as merely prosperous, efficient, well ordered — in short, boring. By 1981, however, when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marched on Bonn to shout nationalist slogans and to condemn the deployment of Pershing 2 and cruise missiles as a heinous anti-German plot, the placid half-nation lying between the Rhine and the Elbe once more had become an object of almost morbid fascination.

What were those Germans up to? They were marching for peace, to be sure, but they were again marching. They were not chanting "Deutschland Uber Alles," yet they were again proclaiming a special mission for their country, pacific as the message admittedly was. The "Greens," seemingly destined to outflank the traditional parties, were only in part like their ecology-minded comrades throughout the West. For they protested not only against nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons but also against NATO and their nation's Western moorings, against the "alienation" of modern life and the "corrupting" routines of parliamentary governance.

These yearnings could be considered echoes from a dark past. Was the German soul adrift again, soaring off into the familiar clouds of political fantasy whence it would come crashing down in irrationalist revolt? Or were the eruptions of the early 1980's just part of a general wave of militant discontent engulfing much of Western Europe?

Walter Laqueur, himself a refugee from the revolt known as the Third Reich and the author of "Weimar: A Cultural History" and "Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement," has not tried to provide us with a set of ironclad answers. His approach is at once less ambitious and more subtle. His method, as the subtitle of "Germany Today" suggests, is that of a "personal report." Returning to the country of his youth, Mr. Laqueur takes us on a kind of sentimental journey tempered

by excursions into sociological and political analysis. The style suits the locale. The book is a collection of loosely related *feuilletons* in the classic central European tradition: a blend of reportage and reminiscence, of impressions and erudition — served up lightly.

Above all, Mr. Laqueur is cautious about his conclusions, and his questions about the *Angst*-ridden Germans of the early 80's are more firmly posed than answered. Is the German mind more easily drawn to apocalyptic visions of *Götterdämmerung*? Yes, but "one will look in vain for people suffering the agonies of Tantalus in the department stores or the football grounds or the swimming pools of Munich or Hamburg." Is there something "specifically German about the protest movement? . . . In some respects precious little." On the other hand, "there are certain analogies [to Germany's prewar past] which cannot be simply ignored." Postwar Germans "have behaved with remarkable maturity," yet some Germans "find it difficult to accept that there are compromises between wearing jackboots and walking barefoot."

Skillfully, Mr. Laqueur points out countless dark corners of German history still visible today: the unthinking enthusiasm that was once so easily perverted; the yearning for the "unspoiled" East and the revulsion against Western "materialism," the absence of a firmly rooted liberal and individualist tradition, the quest for metaphysical and emotional absolutes and the inability to live with intellectual and political uncertainties. Yet the author is also enormously sensitive, as any observer of contemporary Germany ought to be, to the dead weight of sheer normality that determines the course of German history today — peace movement and Greens notwithstanding.

AND thus Mr. Laqueur is right in tempering his sense of foreboding with a strong dose of skepticism about claims that would have "Germany on the march again" and that were particularly seductive when most of these essays were written (1983). No doubt his personal report lacks bite — but for reasons that are intrinsic to the subject matter. To write about Germany in the balanced cadences of "on the one hand on the other hand" may frustrate readers in search of hard and fast verities. Yet such an approach befits a country that, while not fully "normal" by the standards of Western history, has traveled a long way from the aberrations of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.

In the end, the missiles went in while the peace movement went

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from apparent triumph to dissipation. The West German Social Democrats, tempted by an earlier pacifist-neutralist tradition, were roundly defeated at the polls during the crucial contest of March 1983. And the Greens, once relentlessly surging, are now caught in a battle for sheer political survival.

Still, West Germany remains a haunted country; by virtue of its history, it is held to more exact-

ing standards than any other nation in Europe. The furor over President Reagan's Bitburg excursion betrayed not so much resentment as distrust on the part of Americans, lurking just below the solid surface of friendship and alliance.

Nor should this come as a surprise. "Whither Germany?" is a question informed not just by the unyielding memories of a pathological past but also by the abid-

ing claims of contemporary political geography. The Federal Republic is the fulcrum of the ideological and military balance in Europe — too weak to hold its own, too strong to be let alone. Where minor tremors might trigger a full tilt, "normality" is but a hope in the minds of the rest of the world. The center has held, but there will not be an end to the German question — not for a long time. □