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begun to move Charter 88's way. A seminar last weekend, rather tawdryly entitled *Make a Date with Democracy*, was packed by 750 supporters (300 had to be turned away, Democracy having stood them up.) Signatories, which had rather trailed off of late, have at last topped 20,000. Something seems to be moving out there, after all.

If it is, it is not surprising. The power structures of most of Europe are creaking under the strain of the past year's events. Did we really think we could sit at home unaf-

could possibly have imagined. That has increased the momentum for economic and monetary union in the European Community. Finally, a year later, the waves of reform unleashed in Moscow have started crashing on our own shores.

Constitutional issues are now higher on the agenda of British politics than at any time since the Lords rejected Lloyd George's budget in 1909-10. For when Nicholas Ridley, Mrs Thatcher and the Bruges Group rail against a European superstate and insist on the integrity of British institutions,

a general election coming up, I know half of you are unemployed and starving and the soup kitchen's down the road. But we're not going to talk about those things because they're for Herr Pöhl and the Bundesbank." That, he said, could be a recipe for "bloody revolution".

But what else has the government been saying to Jarrow and a thousand places like it since 1979? "Look boys, I'm sorry your industries are dying and half of you are out of work, but that's nothing to do with us. That's market forces.

tainly, if I were a German, my response to abuse from Herr Ridley — a man whose brother, a viscount, enjoys legislative power through accident of birth — would not be outrage; it would be laughter.

It now falls to Mrs Thatcher to defend these and other antique wonders of the British constitution. I wish her joy in it. In the meantime, the much-derided Charter 88 looks increasingly like that most powerful of forces: an idea whose time has come.

# Less a panzer division, more a bank manager on his marks

In the old days, Kaiser Bill would have dispatched a fleet of dreadnoughts, and the Nazis' Air Marshal Goering would have pulverised Windsor Castle, at the least. This time, the punishment was meted out by Her Majesty's very own government. Nicholas Ridley, now the former secretary of trade and industry, was promptly sacked because he had tried to launch world war three against Germany over lunch. Worse, he wasn't even a tiny bit tipsy when he compared Helmut Kohl to Adolf Hitler — straight into the microphone held out by the solicitous editor of *The Spectator*.

With just "the smallest glass of wine" under his belt, Ridley had done a reasonable imitation of Winston Churchill after Dunkirk ("We shall fight them on the beaches"). "Them," however, were not yesteryear's "Huns" but those earnest, flannel-suited New Germans whose most grating trait these days is their galling, unmitigated success.

To be sure, they had not pulled another Dunkirk, but almost. According to Ridley, the almighty German economy was practically the equivalent of Hitler's panzer armies. Humming Deutschmark *Über Alles*, the "uppity" Germans had already reduced the French to yapping, slavering "poodles". And now, with only the pound left to conquer, they were turning the European Community (their new *Lebensraum*?) into a "German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe". Handing British sovereignty over to the community? "You might just as well give it to Adolf Hitler," snorted the trade secretary.

I, for one, am on Nick's side. Put yourself in British shoes. It would have been okay if the Germans had scheduled only reunification for 1990. But then they also decided to

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Nicholas Ridley's last stand was couched in the rhetoric of warfare, but nationalism is not what it used to be, says **Josef Joffe** — the reality lies in balance of payments ledgers

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win the World Cup this year, demolishing the English football team on the way up. The Germans are also about to rack up their biggest trade surplus in history, doing to the dollar what Tojo did to Pearl Harbor. The only good news from the Western Front is that neither Steffi Graf nor Boris Becker managed to take Wimbledon.

Ridley has a right to be upset. Britain had trounced Kaiser Bill, and it had wiped Goering's air armies out of the English skies. After the war, the British had taught the Germans democracy, civility and the arcane culinary delights of Marmite. But nary half a century later, the Germans are number one again. While deutschmark shock-troops are dug in on the French side of the Channel, Bonn Inc has executed a bloodless takeover of Prusso-Marx, Moscow's East German subsidiary. And just last week, board-chairman Gorbachev even let the Germans have Nato — for a small, though still undisclosed, fee. The Greater Central-European Co-Prosperity Sphere now extends from the Atlantic to the Oder-Neisse, with Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia looking for a way in, rather than for a British white knight.

Nor is Ridley a lone crier in the wilderness. Hardly had he been sacrificed, when persons unknown struck another blow for Anglo-German friendship by slipping the

confidential minutes of a meeting in Chequers to *The Independent*. Present were Margaret Thatcher herself, her foreign secretary and sundry German hands from British and American academia.

Here is what these folks thought about the character traits of the boys behind the Rhine, in alphabetical order: angst, aggressiveness, bullying, egotism, neutralism, inferiority complex, pacifism, sentimentality, triumphalism. It was enough to make Karl Otto Pöhl, chief of the almighty Bundesbank, unleash a punitive raid on the Bank of England.

But the peace has held — implying that the New Germans are simply more "pacifist" than "bullying". Or maybe they are just plain "sentimental". After all, the Anglo-Saxons are just Germanic tribes who went north in search of the sunny skies and the three-star *nouvelle cuisine* that have made Britain famous. Also, Queen Elizabeth is practically German herself, a mere branch of the trunk that is the House of Hanover.

Besides, like the animal psychiatrist called in to calm a nervous grizzly, the Chequers minutes concluded with a positively upbeat message: "We should be nice to the Germans." In the end, it was just a spat in the family. Auntie Margaret told cousin Helmut that she would take Nasty Nick to the woodshed if he would let the English team win

the World Cup in 1994. Helmut, in turn, promised that he would cut the British in on the next takeover, say, of Transylvania. Together, they pledged undying family love.

What is the moral of this tale of Thatcherites and Teutons? Easy. This is not the world of 1914 or 1939. Deutschmarks are *not* like panzers, and the score between nations is not tallied by provinces grabbed and armies destroyed. Accounts are settled not by "blood and iron", but by entries in the balance of payments ledgers. Even nationalism isn't what it used to be. At worst, our hooligans rough each other up at the soccer stadium, and then they go home to pop *Lethal Weapon II* into the video. In the old days, Britons and Germans were only too willing to actually *use* the stuff against each other.

And so, six out of 10 Britons still favour German reunification, and by a four-to-one majority young Britons disagreed with Ridley's statement that a joint monetary policy was but a "German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe". But more than half the island would be "worried if Germany became the dominant power in Europe".

This is where Ridley has struck a responsive chord — as he probably has in France, Italy and Poland. The Germans are number one and growing. But they, too, have changed — as their muted, almost sympathetic, reaction to the Ridley outburst has shown. They know that they have to use their muscles carefully, that the new economic game favours them only so long as it is softball rather than hardball. Or as the umpire said: "Three Reichs and you are out."

• The author, foreign editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, wrote the article for *US News and World Report*.

~~Brian Walden is on holiday~~

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