

# The trouble with Germans

COMMENTARY ■ Josef Joffe  
on what all the fuss is about

In the old days, Kaiser Bill would have dispatched a fleet of dreadnoughts, and Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring would have pulverized Windsor Castle. This time, the punishment was meted out by Her Majesty's own government. Nicholas Ridley, now the ex-Secretary of Trade and Industry, was sacked because he had tried to launch World War III against Germany over lunch. Worse, he wasn't even a tiny bit tipsy when he compared Helmut Kohl to Adolf Hitler.

With just "the smallest glass of wine" behind his belt, Ridley had done a reasonable imitation of Winston Churchill after Dunkirk ("We shall fight on the beaches..."). The enemy, however, was 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 "Deutschemark 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 EC? "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 O.K. if the Germans had scheduled only reunification for 1990. But then they also decided to win the World

Cup soccer championship, demolishing the English on the way up. (For Americans: This is like the Super Bowl and the World Series rolled into one and thus more serious than the Battle of Britain or 1066 and all that.) The Germans also are about to rack up their biggest trade surplus in history, doing to the dollar what Tojo did to Pearl Harbor. The only

week, Board Chairman Gorbachev even let the Germans have NATO—for a small, though still undisclosed fee. The Greater Central European Co-Prosperty Sphere now extends from the Atlantic to the Oder-Neisse.

Nor is Nick Ridley a lone crier in the wilderness. Hardly had he been sacrificed when persons unknown



Uber Alles. The German soccer team celebrates its World Cup victory

good news from the Western front is that neither Steffi Graf nor Boris Becker managed to take Wimbledon.

Nick Ridley has a right to be upset. Britain trounced Kaiser Bill, and it wiped Göring's air armies out of the English skies. After the war, the British taught the Germans democracy, civility and the arcane culinary delights of Marmite. But not even half a century later, the Germans are No. 1 again. While deutschemark shock troops are dug in on the French side of the English Channel, Bonn, Inc., has executed a bloodless takeover of Prusso-Marx, Moscow's East German subsidiary—the biggest merger since Kohlberg, Kravis grabbed Nabisco. And just last

struck another blow for Anglo-German friendship by leaking the minutes of a meeting in Chequers (Mrs. Thatcher's answer to Camp David).

**Character traits.** Here is what this group thought about the character traits of the boys behind the Rhine, in alphabetical order: "Aggressiveness," "Angst," "bullying," "egotism," "inferiority complex," "neutrality," "pacifism," "sentimentality," "triumphalism." It was almost enough to make Herr Otto Pöhl of the almighty Bundesbank unleash a punitive raid on the Bank of England.

But the peace has held, implying that the New Germans are more "pacifist" than "bullying." Or maybe just "senti-

mental." After all, the Anglo-Saxons are just Germanic tribes who went north in search of the sunny skies and three-star cuisine that have made Britain famous.

Besides, the Chequers minutes concluded with a positively upbeat message: "We should be nice to the Germans." In the end, it was just a family spat. 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 to cut the British in on his next takeover, say, of Transylvania.

What is the moral of this tale of Thatcherites and Teutons? Easy. This is not the world of 1914 or 1939. Deutschemarks 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 go home to pop "Lethal Weapon 2" into the VCR. In the old days, Britons and Germans were only too willing to actually use the stuff against each other.

And so 6 out of 10 Britons still favor German reunification, and by a 4-1 majority, young Englishmen disagree with Ridley's statement that a joint monetary policy is but a "German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe." But: More than half of 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, too. The Germans are No. 1 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 muscle carefully, that the new economic game favors them only as long as it is softball rather than hardball. Or, as the umpire said: "Three Reichs and you're out."