

BERLIN

DIARIST

Oktoberfest

IN THE ORIGINAL VERSION BY Bismarck, German unification took three wars between 1864 and 1871—against Denmark, Austria, and France. Indeed, unification was proclaimed in the midst of war, and not in Berlin, the capital of the new Reich, but in Versailles—in the heart of occupied France, while besieged Paris was starving. Twenty-five kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and cities became *e pluribus unum* on January 18, 1871, but this process was hardly as benign as the fusion of the thirteen colonies in 1776.

THE LATE BRITISH HISTORIAN A. J. P. Taylor called Unification I the “conquest of Germany by Prussia.” It was done by “blood and iron,” with Bismarck’s Prussia in the saddle. A famous painting by Anton von Werner provides the fitting metaphor. It depicts the king of Prussia, now Emperor William I, surrounded by the new Reich’s princes and generals, who raise their drawn swords in salute. Not all of them were so happy as the painting tries to suggest. Reporting to his brother, the King of Bavaria, Prince Otto wrote: “Everything is so cold, so haughty, so glittery, so pompous—and pretentious, heartless, and empty.”

NO SUCH HEROIC PAINTINGS WILL follow the remake in Berlin on October 3, when East Germany, that dismal experiment in Prusso-Socialism, collapsed westward into the Federal Republic of Germany. This is not a heroic age, and Germany is not a country of pomp and martial gestures. It was virtually business as usual, and the venue of the *Staatsakt* (“ceremony of state”) was a thoroughly civilian locale—the Berlin Philharmonie, a concert hall that looks like an overblown Japanese tea house from the outside and the “Starship Enterprise” on the inside. No drawn swords and fancy uniforms here; just the drabness of gray and navy business suits. No *Deutschland über Alles*; just a little Bach, a smattering of Haydn, and the last two movements of Brahms’s Second Symphony.

THE GERMANS ARE SAID TO BE A *gründlich* race—relentlessly efficient at anything they do. On this day they are

relentlessly efficient at being nice. After a couple of musical intermezzos and speeches by dignitaries, a well-groomed man in his 40s strides to center stage, announcing that he is here to represent the voice of the common folk. How democratic, everybody thinks, leaning back in expectation of the vox populi. As it turns out, the speaker has not been invited, and the message, a garble of gibberish, was probably drafted in Wittenau, Berlin’s answer to Bellevue. Since he is addressing the pillars of the German establishment—president, chancellor, ministers, and all—who are sitting fifteen feet away along a clear line of fire, you might think he would be instantly tackled by a horde of security men. In fact, he is at first politely asked to leave the stage—which he ignores. Nor does anyone yell for the police—the audience just unleashes a relentless wave of applause that drowns out the self-appointed people’s spokesman. Only then is he firmly taken in hand and whisked off the dais. Germans and the world probably could not have wished for a better beginning. If somebody like our uninvited speaker could make it past the security checks all the way to the rostrum, then the Germans are no longer so efficient in the old business of building perfect police states.

THEY JUST WANT TO BE NICE, and lest anybody forget, they will say so with relentless repetition. Sabine Bergmann-Pohl, the former Speaker of the East German Parliament, stresses that there is “no nationalist exuberance” this time, and she pledges that “we will be Europeans as well as Germans.” All speakers invoke the Holocaust, calling it, as does President Richard von Weizsäcker, “the most horrible of crimes” and vowing that “we will forever remember the victims.” Never again, he proclaims, will the Germans fall for the “romantic search for a third way” between East and West, between authority and liberty. That is just an “illusion.” And he earns the longest applause when he thanks our “allies and friends, above all the Americans, Britons, and French,” for their “protection and support.”

THE LADY, DOT SHE PROTEST too much? Let us, as in real life, not question her avowals but scrutinize her circumstances. The issue of virtue simply does not arise when there is no temptation. Just as the October 3 remake bears no resemblance to the 1871 original, Germany ’90 is not even a pale copy of

the Wilhelminian Empire, the Weimar Republic, or the Third Reich. Germany is a boringly normal democracy, not a country where liberty is sacrificed to the Fatherland or trampled by jackboots. Nor does Germany ’90 long for lebensraum and aggrandizement; indeed, most West Germans probably would have been perfectly happy to live with another German state *sine die*. And finally, as von Weizsäcker puts it: “For the first time, we Germans are not an issue of contention on the European agenda. Our unity has not been inflicted on anybody; it is the result of peaceful agreement.” Yes,

Germany will be bigger and stronger than anybody else on the European map, but unity was handed to the Germans, not conquered by them in a war of aggression. The only violence took place on the Alexanderplatz the night before, when an anti-unity demonstration, penetrated by the usual contingent

of masked would-be urban guerrillas, erupted into a battle with the police.

WHAT WILL THE GERMANS DO with their clout, now that the fetters of the postwar order have fallen away as both Americans and Russians go home? The new game in Europe—exports rather than expansion, welfare rather than warfare—favors the Germans above all, and thus there is no temptation for them to change the rules back to the nastier days of yore. Nor do solidly bourgeois democracies beholden to the “pursuit of happiness,” as Frau Bergmann-Pohl puts it in a bow to the Declaration of Independence, fall easily for the seductive tune of the Pied Pipers. When the *Staatsakt* in the Philharmonie was over, thousands again converged on the Reichstag, the towering building that once symbolized Germany’s hapless quest for grandeur and power. Yet there were no speeches and no flags. Just mothers pushing their prams, and curious tourists from all over Germany swilling beer and Coke. It could have been the end of a baseball game where *neither* team lost. The Germans have been very lucky this time. But so, it seems, are Europe and the rest of the world. The sequel to “Blood and Iron” has a happy beginning.

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