

# An East-West Ambivalence

## IN EUROPE'S NAME

Germany and the Divided Continent

By Timothy Garton Ash

(Random House: \$27.50; 680 pp.)

### Reviewed by Josef Joffe

This is an ambivalent book about an ambivalent subject: Germany and "Ostpolitik," its policy toward the East from the late '60s to the early '90s. A country that itself is the very epitome of ambivalence, Germany has found itself regularly pitted against the West, but it also fought Russia and Poland. In peace, it embraced Enlightenment as well as Romanticism, Western liberalism and Nazi totalitarianism. Frederick the Great of Prussia wrote French and lionized Voltaire, but that did not keep him from militarizing his society and fighting the entire neighborhood—right, left and center.

The Federal Republic (formerly West Germany) was born as a child of the West, as progeny of Western strategy in

Josef Joffe is columnist and editorial page editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich.

the Cold War. But it was an uneasy youth. As soon as Konrad Adenauer, the founding father, had gained entry to NATO in 1955, he opened a diplomatic channel to Moscow. Hardly had the Berlin Wall gone up in 1961, seemingly dividing Europe and East Germany forever, when Willy Brandt, the future chancellor, began drafting the New Ostpolitik. That policy

Garton Ash concludes in this brilliantly written and researched analysis of East-West diplomacy. The "favorable variant" he had "imagined for Germany and Europe . . . did not seem probable." Yet, he concludes, "there are worse combinations than that of skepticism and hope."

"Skepticism and hope"—another expression for *ambivalence*—could almost

---

**The problem is to distinguish between 'what people said in public, what they said or merely thought in private, and, not least, what they think or say now that they thought or said then.' Let this sink in and you'll understand the perils of contemporary history.**

---

would eventually position Bonn halfway between an alliance with the West and a separate detente with the East. Today, all of Germany is in the West, but in truth, the West is no more, and neither is the East. So where does that leave Germany?

"Troubled and burdened," Timothy

serve as the motto for this book. While Ash, the Oxford scholar, may have liked to deliver hard and fast answers to the age-old question "Whence and whither Germany?," he has ended up writing in the manner of a New York Review of Books essay: learned and magisterial, but

with a journalist's penchant for drama; reflective to the point of rumination, but with a fine eye for irony and imagery.

Ash's book is indeed an exciting tale and veritable gold mine of original information. In seven years of research, he gained access to the personal papers of chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt, of Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Egon Bahr, Brandt's confidant and architect of the New Ostpolitik. Thanks to the collapse of East Germany, Ash could also tap into minutes of the Politburo, Central Committee records and files of the Stasi, the East German secret police.

Ash lets them all speak for themselves, copiously and patiently. But what did all those leaders really want? Did they, as Brandt put it, really "accept the results of history" and their definitive attachment to the West? Or did they—slowly and craftily—actually seek to subvert the postwar order by pushing Russians and Americans out of the European center in the name of disengagement and disarmament?

Did West German leaders speak "in  
Please see Page 10

G. Febr. 94

## 'In Europe's Name'

*Continued from Page 2*

Europe's name," all the while pursuing coldblooded national interests? Or was Helmut Schmidt, chancellor from 1974 to 1982, merely acting as "honest interpreter" for the West when he ventured to Moscow a few months after the Afghanistan invasion? "Plain speaking," Ash notes, "was not Bonn's forte. Waifle was."

Here, too, Ash the journalist as historian is the master of ambivalence, and perhaps rightly so. He puts the problem well on Page 2. It is the difficulty of "distinguishing between what people said in public, what they said or merely thought in private, and, not least, what they think or say now that they thought or said then." Let this sink in, and you'll understand the perils of contemporary history.

Sorting out reasons and rationalizations, which Ash does with a sharp eye for posturing and obfuscation, becomes even more difficult when, in the middle of it all, history suddenly overturns the gaming board. "Whither Ostpolitik?" became a moot question on Nov. 9, 1989, when East Germany began to collapse. Less than a year later, Germany was reunified; by Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet Union was no more. Suddenly, Bahr's schemes or Genscher's circumlocutions no longer mattered. It was as if they had worked away at needlepointh when, in a twist of cunning, history hit them with the whole textile factory.

Ash, in his cautious and subtle way, does leave us with some lessons worth pondering. For one, he faults Ostpolitik for its excessive, coldhearted realism. For all its pieties (which Ash deftly skewers), Ostpolitik, especially in its Social Democratic variant from 1969 to 1982, came very close to betraying the very values it purported to uphold. Rather than say-

ing so himself, Ash lets Vaclav Havel—the Czech writer and dissident who would become President—speak: "Ostpolitik . . . mandated at times to be well and truly ambiguous. . . . It signified, of course, the first glimmer of hope for a Europe without Cold War. . . . ; yet at the same time—alas—it more than once signified the renunciation of freedom, and hence of a basic condition for any real peace."

Did Ostpolitik and detente really kill them with kindness? There was certainly plenty of "reassurance," but very little "relaxation." In the end, it was not Bonn's latter-day Metternichs but Solidarity and the people gathering by the hundreds of thousands in Leipzig that forced liberty from the tightfisted hands of the Communist regimes.

In the meantime, Ash's book has become a munitions dump from which the left and the right draw freely to snipe away at each other again. Social Democrats see "In Europe's Name" as proof consummate that they had always been right: It was Ostpolitik and detente that softened up the Soviet Empire. Further to the right, politicians and publicists point instead to Reagan, SDI and the "Euromissiles"—the West had simply arms-raced the East to death.

To use the book so brazenly as Exhibit X for both sides does Ash wrong. His forte is not the battle-ax but the thin-bladed rapier, always poised to pierce cant and to slash pretense. And he is too scrupulous—and too subtle—a historian to hawk a simple message. Was it Brandt-Bahr-Genscher or Reagan-Perle-Baker who undid the Soviet Union? Let Ash respond: "The first answer is: both. The second is: neither." ■