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■ Germany, Russia, History

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How far into the past should one reach to discover the very origin of Germany's *Russlandpolitik*? This policy towards Russia, which failed spectacularly on February 24, 2022, does indeed have historical roots. However, none of them extend as far back as the 18th or 19th centuries or even the Interbellum. The historical determinants of the reunified Germany's policy towards Russia only go back as far as the last few decades. It would be absurd to assert influences from earlier periods. Everything has changed since those earlier times: Germany itself, the German society, and the configuration of international powers. In both the 19th century and the 1920s, Germany's policy goals towards Russia differed radically from those adopted under the rule of Helmut Kohl, Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel.

The current stance of the Olaf Scholz administration on Putin's Russia has been raising doubts. Berlin has been accused of procrastination and excessive caution, although a firm intervention by the Social Democratic Chancellor in the Bundestag on Sunday, February 27 (proclaiming *die Zeitenwende* or a "turn of an era") was received as a radical paradigm shift. However, the new approach did not last long. The Federal Republic's policy towards Russia remains controversial. It is unclear how profound the change in Berlin's policy is and especially whether it is permanent.

Myths about traditional cooperation between Germany and Russia

In August 1772, three German nationals concluded an agreement on the first partition of Poland. In addition to Prussian King Frederick II and Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, the deal involved Russian Tsarina Sophie Auguste Friederike von Anhalt-Zerbst, later known as Catherine II. This was not the first time

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that courts in Berlin and St. Petersburg worked hand in glove against Poland but let us not go into the intricate details of previous diplomatic meanders. The collaboration among the three black eagles (this bird was featured on the emblems of each of the invaders) was fueled by the desire to keep the Polish issue from the agendas of European cabinets post 1795 (the year of the third partition of Poland). This commonality of interests helped preserve the Prussian-Russian-Austrian solidarity well into the 19th century. However, one should beware of oversimplifications as, to give one example, Bismarck's policy towards Russia, later wrongly described as consistently pro-Russian, was also plagued by serious setbacks and upheavals erupting regularly between Berlin and St. Petersburg.

The disseminators of clichés on the alleged time-honored cooperation between Berlin and Moscow appear to forget the collisions that pitted the Germans and Russians against each other in the two world wars, and that the first time that victorious Russian forces advanced into Berlin was in October 1760 rather than April 1945.

Neither was the sudden shift in mutual relations associated with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939, the first of its kind. It was preceded by the famous "Miracle of the House of Brandenburg" during the Seven Years' War of 1756-1763, when the death of Empress Elizabeth saved Frederick II of Prussia from imminent disaster and - half a century later - by Prussia's political maneuverings between Russia and France during the Napoleonic wars, including the famous Convention of Tauroggen of December 1812, both of which paved the way for Prussia into a new alliance with Russia concluded in the following year, in February 1813, in Kalisz. A few decades later, Russophobia in the Kaiser Reich and Germanophobia in the Russian Empire solidified German-Russian antagonism becoming one of the main causes of World War I. When that war broke out, many German planners painted a picture of future conquests and the exploitation of vast swathes of the tsarist empire. The peace treaty that humiliated Bolshevik Russia, which was forced upon Russia by the Germans in February 1918, appeared to be a great opportunity for the Reich. A few months later, their defeat on the Western Front put an end to German dreams of exploiting Eastern Europe.

The myth on the significance of the Treaty of Rapallo

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the German-Soviet Treaty of Rapallo in April 1922. At the time, diplomatic relations were established by and between two pariah states that had been excluded from the Versailles peace deal. The name of this agreement found its way into history textbooks and to this day remains synonymous with cooperation between Germany and Russia. In reality, however, the option the treaty was designed to preserve was never pursued. Thanks to Gustav Stresemann, the Weimar Republic attempted to revise the Treaty of Versailles by engaging in peaceful cooperation with Western powers, as symbolized by the Pact of Locarno of 1925 and Germany's accession to the League of Nations, where it immediately secured a permanent seat on the Council of this Geneva-based organization. The much-sensationalized collaboration between the *Reichswehr* and the Red Army did not amount to much. Neither did the German-Soviet Treaty

of Berlin of 1926. The German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact with its secret protocol on the division of Eastern Europe of August 23, 1939, which made the Pact an agreement on aggression, was concluded under very different circumstances.

Besides, it did not last long. Operation "Barbarossa" put an end to a collaborative spell between the two predators who completely distrusted each other. On June 22, 1941, Germany started a war of attrition in the east that ended the lives of twenty million Soviet citizens who included Russians as well as Ukrainians, Belarusians, and others. In Nazi doctrine and propaganda, the Russians were classified as *Untermenschen*, i.e. sub-human. The Red Army soldiers repaid the Germans in the last months of the war with their unbridled acts of crime, rapes, and plundering. Large propaganda boards that read: "*Vot ahnah, pryeklyataya Gyermania*" were encountered by Soviet soldiers before they entered Reich territory. The fates of German soldiers in Soviet captivity, many of whom never returned, traumatized numerous families in Germany. Little did they know that about three million Red Army soldiers died in German captivity.

Adenauer's Federal Republic of Germany and relations with Moscow

Thanks to its first chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the Federal Republic was permanently bound with the Western world. The pillars of its *Westbindung*, or ties with the West, were its alliance with the USA and its integration with Western Europe. West of the Elbe, the Soviet Union was viewed as a hostile state whose tanks bloodily suppressed the revolt of East German workers in June 1953 and which agreed, in 1961, to construct the notorious Berlin Wall, a symbol of the division of Germany and Europe.

It took a long time for Germany's oldest political party, which was in opposition to the Christian Democrats, to come to terms with the fact that Germany's relationship with the West and its NATO membership was more important than its reunification. Soon, however, many West German Social Democrats adopted a new way of thinking about the East. This was the time that should be considered the origin of Germany's policy towards Russia, including the policy pursued in the last three decades.

The new *Ostpolitik* of the German Social Democrats

In 1963 Egon Bahr, the architect of Willy Brandt's West German "new eastern policy", called for "a change through rapprochement" (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). In a nutshell: the goal was to overcome the division of Germany and Europe by establishing friendly relations with the "Eastern bloc", especially as this was in line with the policy of the West (and in particular with the US) towards the East. In the late 1960s, under the rule of the Social Democrats and liberals, the Federal Republic inaugurated a policy of openness towards the USSR, Poland, East Germany, and the rest of the communist bloc. Few in Germany had faith in an imminent reunification as, in the 1970s, the Soviet Union seemed to be as powerful and stable as ever.

Therefore, the primary aim, adopted especially in keeping with Germany's growing pacifist tendencies, was to strive for a *détente*. This came as no surprise as, should World War III ever break out, the expectation was that it would be waged on the territory of both German states.

Even then though, the West German Social Democrats formed the conviction that *détente* was more valuable than other nations' aspirations to free themselves from under the Soviet yoke under which they had suffered since 1945. Egon Bahr himself was honest in his cynicism: "The West German ruling circles largely distanced themselves from the Polish Solidarity social movement. Bonn saw the imposition of martial law in Poland as an evil nevertheless conceding that the evil was necessary. The general impression was that the German *SPD* party acquiesced in the Brezhnev doctrine. This impression was confirmed in the following years when the Social Democrats became the opposition".

After the *SPD* was removed from power in 1982, the Christian Democrats, who ruled the country in a coalition with the liberals and who were led by Helmut Kohl, dampened relations with the USSR, but continued to move in the ruts left behind by previous Bonn cabinets. Distrustful of the new Soviet leader, the chancellor at first compared the eloquent new general secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, Mikhail Gorbachev, with Goebbels. Soon, however, the *détente* period was revived, this time leading to overcoming the divisions of Europe and Germany. Contrary to the position of East Germany's doctrinaire communists who remained in power, both West and East Germany continued to warm up to Gorbachev from one year and then from one month to the next. The German "gorbimania" seemed to have reached its zenith in the fall of 1989, when the Kremlin leader approved the dismissal of East Berlin hardliner Erich Honecker and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. A few months later, after Moscow agreed not only to the reunification of Germany but also to having that reunification proceed on Western terms, which meant first and foremost that the "new" Federal Republic would remain in NATO, Germany's enthusiasm for Gorbachev was off the charts. Without a doubt, gratitude for unexpectedly swift consent to the reunification swayed Germany's policy towards Moscow in the 1990s making it significantly more friendly.

The foundations of Germany's *Russlandpolitik* after the Cold War

After Gorbachev left the government with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Germans shifted their sympathies to Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Federation, which saw itself as a legal successor of the Soviet Union. It was then that the foundations of the German *Russlandpolitik* were laid that the Federal Republic would rely on for the following three decades. This policy was adhered to by the three chancellors: Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl, Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder and Christian Democrat Angela Merkel.

Germany considered Yeltsin as a pro-Western leader who oversaw a transformation of post-Soviet Russia towards a free market economy (Yegor Gaidar's reforms). This was why it considered it well-advised to take his side even after he unleashed

Russia's armed forces on a democratically elected parliament in fall of 1993. The Russian war crimes committed during the so-called First Chechen War also passed with little opposition. Berlin deluded itself that Yeltsin's policy would result in the Russian state embracing Western values: human and civil rights, freedom of speech, rule of law, and a free market economy. Above all, Russia was to become a linchpin of a peace-based European and world order. The thinking was that Yeltsin needed to be supported because, should he fall, anti-Western autocrats would be quick to take his place and rise to power in the Kremlin. In addition, German industry insisted that the best possible political relations be maintained between Berlin and Moscow to facilitate business with Russia. This was a continuing influence on Germany's *Russlandpolitik*. Berlin long turned a blind eye on the fact that the Russians increasingly associated the "Yeltsin administration" with corruption, a failed state, social impoverishment, and the humiliating excesses of their drunken leader. In the end, however, West Germany had to admit that Yeltsin wreaked chaos. Nevertheless, Berlin believed that there was no alternative to building the best possible relationship ("a strategic partnership") with Moscow.

The energetic Vladimir Putin impressed the Russians as well as the Germans, and especially the German social democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder. When, on September 25, 2001, speaking in the Bundestag, President Putin offered Germany and the West Russian help in building a new peace-based order, the prospects were reassuring. Soon, however, Western unity was broken as the German Chancellor and French President Jacques Chirak joined Putin to form a united front against George W. Bush. Never since World War II have friendly German-Russian ties contrasted so strongly with icy German-American relations. The German chancellor and Putin's friend described Putin in 2004 as a "staunch democrat". In the following year, shortly before the Bundestag elections, an agreement was signed to construct the Nord Stream gas pipeline. For Russia, this was an opportunity to cease respecting the interests of Ukraine and Poland, which was allied with Germany.

Relations between Berlin and Moscow during the Merkel era

In all its various configurations, the sixteen-year rule of Angela Merkel that began in 2005 upheld the *Russlandpolitik* of the previous administrations. Not only because of the involvement of the Social Democrats (Merkel's long-time head of diplomacy, the social democrat Frank-Walter Steinmeier, took particular care to ensure the continuity of the "strategic partnership" with Russia), the policy course adopted previously, not only by Schröder but also by Kohl before him, was strictly maintained. When the liberal *FDP* became a coalition partner of the Christian Democrats for one term of office, it (and in particular its Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle) was in a position to invoke the line of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who pursued a Moscow-friendly policy with Chancellor Kohl in the early 1990s.

Distanced from Putin and unlike Schröder, who, to the dismay of the German public, accepted employment from the Russians on the board of a consortium hired to construct the Nord Stream gas pipeline, Merkel kept Berlin's policy towards Moscow largely unchanged. The Chancellor consistently described Nord Stream and

its twin Nord Stream 2 as a purely business venture until the end of her 16-year rule. Minister Steinmeier, on the other hand, remained faithful to the traditions of his party predecessors. His Partnership for Modernization (*Modernisierungspartnerschaft*) project put forward in May 2008, alluded directly to the 1970s concepts of "change through rapprochement", "rapprochement through interdependence" and "change through trade" (*Wandel durch Handel*).

Russia's aggression against Georgia in August 2008 led to a short-lived collapse in German-Russian relations. These were quickly restored after which Berlin's policy differed little from the approaches adopted by other Western states, primarily the US. It was not until 2014 that Germany's illusions of "strategic partnership" dissipated: the victory of the pro-EU protest movement in Kiev, Russia's annexation of Crimea and Moscow's recognition of the secessionist Donetsk and Luhansk "republics" in eastern Ukraine tipped the scales. And although Merkel did say that Putin could not get away with it, there was not enough political will to take a firmer stance. In the early months, Germany hesitated about imposing EU sanctions on Russia that nevertheless merely amounted to half-measures, only to come around soon afterwards. Every six months since 2014, Berlin has opted to extend the sanctions. However, the policy of the Federal Republic ended there.

Germany's self-deception led to its attempt to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the so-called Normandy format. In the following years, Russia effectively blocked the implementation of the "Minsk agreements", blaming Kyiv for the failure. Berlin gave credence to the Russian "explanations". The successive infringements of Putin's regime, and especially the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny, significantly chilled Germany's position on Russia, yet without causing an outright about-face in Germany's *Russlandpolitik*. After the annexation of Crimea, Germany set out to implement Nord Stream 2, which Chancellor Merkel never stopped defending as he continued to describe it as a purely commercial undertaking. She stressed that President Putin had promised her that Russia would protect Ukraine's interests in this context. Moreover, as she traveled to see Putin in Moscow and Sochi, Chancellor Merkel put herself in the position of a petitioner who depended on the benevolence of the Russian president to mitigate the Syrian and Libyan crises. The question of Ukraine was relegated to the back burner. Towards the end of her reign, the outgoing chancellor paid several farewell visits not only to such friendly countries as France, the US, Israel, and Poland, but also to Putin's Russia. This showed clearly just how naïve - and perhaps cynical - Germany's *Russlandpolitik* had become.

A hesitant turn after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine

Berlin's response to the growing Russian threat to Ukraine was a characteristic knee-jerk reaction showing that Germany remained in the rut of its hitherto policies which grew to become a travesty of the social-democratic Ostpolitik of the Brandt and Schmidt administrations. Faithful to the ways of its predecessors, the Scholz government strove to avoid isolating Russia and opted for dialogue. Even in the first days after the invasion of Ukraine, Germany did not change its stance. It was only on Sunday, February 27, that the chancellor announced that his government would



abandon its former *Russlandpolitik* and thoroughly revamp its security policy, allocating large sums to the strengthening of Germany's defenses.

However, whether this step is a truly fundamental change of policy towards Russia remains to be seen. The traditions of Germany's eastern policy, as observed in the last few decades, call for a cautious assessment.

The views expressed in this publication belong solely to its author.

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