

# Pride in Germany—an absurd debate

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“Germania, you horrify me!” wrote the revolutionary democrat and poet George Herwegh in his *Epilogue to War*. It was 1871, the year the German Reich was founded. A good 60 years later when the painter Max Liebermann looked from his window onto Berlin's Pariser Platz and saw the Nazis marching through the Brandenburg Gate, he noted in his diary: “I can't eat as much as I would like to throw up.”

Twelve years sufficed for the “German master race” to reduce Europe to ruins and give the term “barbarism” a new dimension. But hardly have the consequences of the Second World War been overcome and the divided country once again unified than the chauvinist sirens have returned with their new motto: “Pride in Germany”. As always, their pride is fused with stupidity. They cannot even perceive the absurdity of their *völkisch* theatrics.

It began last autumn, when, in a newspaper interview, Friedrich Merz, the chairman of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) faction in the Bundestag (parliament) raised the demand for a “defining German culture” to which foreigners would have to subordinate themselves. For weeks the topic dominated the headlines and led to violent disputes in the Bundestag. Jewish and Moslem groups protested, pointing out that the demand for a defining German culture inevitably evoked memories of the Nazis and their *völkisch* ideology.

With the New Year, 2001 was declared the “Year of Prussia”. The fact that 300 years ago Brandenburg's Elector, Friedrich III, placed the crown upon his head and proclaimed himself King Friedrich I of Prussia has become the occasion for a large-scale spectacle, with more than 600 meetings and over 100 exhibitions, plus parades, marches and a welter of publications in the course of the year.

Berlin and the state of Brandenburg are shelling out 25 million marks for these ceremonies commemorating “Prussia's pomp and circumstance”, although they habitually point to their empty coffers when it comes to public spending. The aesthetic side of the Hohenzollern dynasty is being afforded centre stage, placing aggressive Prussian militarism abroad and at home in the background.

The Year of Prussia was barely three months old when the next debate began. This time, the CDU right wing demanded that everyone who occupies a public office be compelled to declare his or her pride in Germany. The immediate trigger for this dispute was a controversy surrounding Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin (Green Party). In the face of fierce criticism by opponents of nuclear power concerning Trittin's close and servile collaboration with the atomic industry, as well as forthcoming state elections, Trittin tried to polish up his image by attacking the CDU general secretary. “Laurenz Meyer not only looks like a skinhead, he has the mentality of one,” Trittin declared.

Some months ago, Laurenz Meyer had answered a journalist's question by saying, “I am proud to be German.” This was not merely a somewhat banal statement of national pride, but a coded formulation, which has been used for many years by groups of neo-Nazis. Not only can this slogan be found on skinheads' bomber jackets, but it also adorns the banners of the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD).

Meyer had intentionally chosen this phrase in order to tie extreme right-wingers to the CDU and set the party on a German-national course. He

immediately went on the offensive against Trittin's attack. The Green leader publicly declared that his remark was not meant as a personal insult against Meyer, but the CDU general secretary would not accept Trittin's apology.

The fact that only a few weeks before, after loud public protests, the very same Laurenz Meyer had been forced to withdraw an election poster against the Social Democratic Party (SPD), on which he depicted SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder as a wanted criminal, for which Meyer still refuses to apologise, is deemed to be of no consequence.

The CDU is demanding the immediate dismissal of the Environment Minister. Former CDU Chairman Wolfgang Schäuble made the absurd claim that Trittin's criticism of the slogan “I am proud to be a German” would drive millions who felt a “healthy national pride” into the arms of right-wing extremist organisations.

In the state elections in Rhineland-Palatinate, the CDU used this slogan to encourage nationalist sentiments and thereby found itself in unity with the right-wing extremist NPD. However, as in Austria, where Jörg Haider's anti-Semitic tirades mobilised his opponents more than his supporters, in Rhineland-Palatinate the CDU's shot went wide of the mark. The CDU suffered a clear loss of votes, as many citizens reacted with indignation and disgust.

This did not prevent the CDU/CSU from advancing and intensifying their campaign. At a special session of the Bundestag convened by the CDU/CSU, they called for a vote on Trittin's dismissal, recording the vote of every deputy by name. The leader of the parliamentary faction, Merz, demanded that every politician, regardless of party affiliation, unconditionally proclaim his or her German national pride or lose the right to be politically active in Germany.

Instead of combating the chauvinist spectre, SPD politicians competed with the CDU right wing as to who were the proudest and best Germans.

At the beginning of the 1970s, when the first Social Democratic federal president, Gustav Heinemann, was pressured by the right wing to declare his *vaterlandsliebe* (love of the fatherland), he answered curtly: “I love my wife, so that's that!” Today, this point of view would isolate him within his own party.

Johannes Rau (SPD), today's federal president—who for many years was a close friend of Heinemann and is married to his granddaughter—at first dared to utter a cautious objection, remarking that one does not necessarily have to associate one's love for the homeland with pride. When the right-wing CDU mob attacked him, however, he immediately sought to improve on his statement. He insisted that there were many things in today's Germany of which he was also proud, and that he had long been a convinced patriot. Chancellor Schröder at once joined in, proclaiming his “pride in Germany's performance at home and abroad”.

It is remarkable how a small group of CDU right-wingers, who enjoy little support in the general population, are able to whip the “Red-Green” federal government into line.

The reason for this lies above all in the fact that drastic cuts in public spending being implemented by the Schröder government in the interests of the rich have sharply intensified the level of social polarisation in Germany. Since the SPD-Green Party coalition government came to

power two-and-a-half years ago, the gulf between the rich and poor has grown significantly wider. In view of this situation, social democrats and Greens are encouraging chauvinist campaigns, and have heavily circumscribed the rights of asylum-seekers. They regard nationalism and *vaterlandsliebe* as a prop and a form of ideological cement, required to counteract the centrifugal tendencies tearing apart the social fabric.

This is why Trittin's criticism of Laurenz Meyer is so hollow and unserious. Trittin is a minister in a government that authorised the first combat missions by the German army since the end of Nazi rule, and which has trampled underfoot the social and democratic rights of the population.

A few years ago, hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Germany in candlelight processions against right-wing extremist violence and racism. Since then, right-wing violence has increased, but nobody any longer expects serious resistance from the government. The political climate has moved visibly to the right and, as the recent "national pride" debate shows, the right wing feels emboldened. The responsibility for this lies above all with the Red-Green government.

Trittin has had many opportunities to oppose the CDU right wing, and would have enjoyed the support of a large section of the population. But this is exactly what he and other cabinet members did not want under any circumstances, because a movement from below would threaten their own policies. In the final analysis, they have nothing with which to oppose the CDU right wing, because they agree with them on all basic questions.

The present debate is marked by its completely ahistorical character.

Naturally, nationalist propaganda is also used for reactionary aims in other countries, but in Germany it always takes on particularly aggressive and malicious forms. This has historical roots. In countries such as France and the US the development of the nation was connected with revolution and civil war, i.e., with popular movements that were inspired by great revolutionary ideals. The demands for liberty, equality and solidarity formed the basis for the declaration of human rights.

Things proceeded differently in Germany. The first influential national movement developed against occupation by Napoleon's troops, and its ranks included those who rejected not only occupation by Napoleon, but also the progressive principles of the French Revolution.

In his extensive study *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaats* (*Cosmopolitanism and the National State: Studies on the Genesis of the German National State*), the historian Friedrich Meinecke drew attention at the beginning of the twentieth century to the ambivalent character of early German nationalism. Meinecke showed that the formation of the French national state was connected directly with the great ideas of the Enlightenment. He wrote: "Does not the first great national state in Europe, which was founded consciously upon the autonomy of the nation, the France of the revolution, bursting forth from the loins of the eighteenth century, spring from a soil completely saturated with universal and cosmopolitan ideas?"

Resting on the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (*Speeches to the German Nation*), which Fichte composed during the resistance movement against Napoleon (1808/09), Meinecke stressed that "the bearers of Germany's formation" held the opinion at the time "that the true, the best German national feeling included the cosmopolitan ideal of a supra-national humanity, that it is 'un-German to be merely German'".

But with the defeat of the revolution of 1848, Germany's unification by Bismarck under Prussian leadership and the establishment of the Reich after the victory over France (1871), German nationalism assumed distinctly reactionary characteristics. The advocacy of German-ness was accompanied by hatred of the French, the laws banning socialists and a good dose of anti-Semitism.

Since then German nationalism has served an aggressive policy of imperialist conquest, because Germany's rapidly growing industrial

production required new markets and sources of raw materials. Confined within the restricting system of European states, this situation led to two world wars unleashed from German soil.

Today, German capitalism is revealing itself again in the same way it developed historically. Its internal contradictions were not resolved in the past, but rather in the decades after 1945 were only covered over. Once again its dynamic and productive economy also constitutes its Achilles' heel.

With American support in the context of the Marshall Plan, the consequences of defeat were overcome and the German economic miracle of the 1950s and '60s was financed. In the shade of the US, German trade and economic relations spread to every corner of the globe, a development that was accelerated even more rapidly by the globalisation of production.

In the years of the Cold War, American supremacy remained unquestioned in the Western alliance, but with the end of the Soviet Union 10 years ago the situation changed. The economic and political tensions between the great powers have increased. The representatives of German trade associations stress everywhere that Germany is once again a leading world export nation and must aggressively stand up for its economic and political interests.

Germany's great power politics led to disaster in the past. Today, even the elementary prerequisites are missing. Germany is neither economically nor militarily in a position to challenge or replace American supremacy in the world. Indeed, the past five decades—the longest period of internal and external stability in the history of Germany—were directly based on economic cooperation with America.

For this reason, the actions of Friedrich Merz and Laurenz Meyer in the Bundestag come across as bizarre and operatic. Although business, culture and all other areas of society have long outgrown the narrow boundaries of the national state, they are trying to animate the worn out ghost of German nationalism. This development is directly connected with the fact that official politics has divorced itself from the interests of the general population and is directed against them.

If one regards the absurd *völkisch* theatre of recent weeks from the point of view of a sociologist, then one can detect in the protagonists two typical representatives of contemporary politics. On one side stands Jürgen Trittin, the Green environment minister, who acceded to every demand of the nuclear energy industry in negotiations with the large energy utilities. As if he had sprung from the pages of Heinrich Mann's novel *Man of Straw*, he appears in the form of a petty craftsman or small businessman, who, for better or worse, faces the pressure of the large companies and banks and cannot escape. In negotiations, he is obsequious: "Of course, Herr Director; naturally, Herr Director; at your service, Herr Director," he says through clenched teeth. Hardly has he left the room than he makes a fist and swears: "One day, I will kill him."

On the other side stands CDU party chief Friedrich Merz, the son of a provincial judge, who is deeply convinced of his own historical mission. As if seeking at every opportunity to evoke the German proverb "stupidity and pride grow on the same tree", he beats his chest and utters the greatest banalities. He embodies a layer of younger, conservative politicians, whose arrogance is based on the stock market boom of the past decade, and who have never experienced any major social battles. His narrow-minded, conservative conception of the world was shaped above all by the fact that the largest and strongest social force, the working class, has played almost no independent role in the past period.

This also reveals the core of the problem. The great lesson of the past century is that there is only one social force capable of opposing reactionary nationalism and its devastating consequences: the working class, which makes up the vast majority of the population. While the right-wing demagogues seek to divert growing social tensions into nationalist and racist channels, the social crisis also creates the objective prerequisites to revive the workers movement.



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