

Former German President Richard von Weizsäcker dies

Peter Schwarz
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Listening and reading to the obituaries for former German President Richard von Weizsäcker, who died on Saturday morning at the age of 94, one is relieved he was Protestant and not Catholic. Otherwise, he would have been proclaimed a saint.

Countless German television and radio programs have praised the former president in the most glowing terms. The Sunday newspapers all published multiple-page articles hailing von Weizsäcker, who was head of state from 1984 to 1994.

Weizsäcker's greatest achievement was unanimously considered to be his speech on 8 May 1985 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Nazi Germany's capitulation in World War II. He described the end of the war as "a day of liberation," rather than a day of defeat and shame, as many German politicians had previously done.

In fact, the speech and the praise it continues to receive today says more about the German elite's relationship to democracy and the mass of the population, than about Weizsäcker.

Many, if not the majority of the population, experienced the end of the war in 1945 as a liberation—liberation from a brutal dictatorship that suppressed and targeted dissenting opinions, liberation from a regime that had committed unspeakable crimes, and liberation from nights of bombardment. With the economic upswing after the war, the throng of those who had backed the Nazi regime dwindled to a tiny minority.

This was not the case, however, with the ruling elite in the Federal Republic. In the state, judicial and security apparatus, in the leading offices of big business, and in university departments, numerous old Nazis and collaborators continued to be active—men who had been deeply implicated in the crimes of the Third Reich. If they distanced themselves from Hitler, it was because he had led Germany to defeat, and not because he sought to establish German imperialist domination of the world and to destroy the workers' movement.

The forces behind the failed assassination attempt of July

20, 1944, who only turned against Hitler when defeat in the war was inevitable, were presented as heroes of the resistance. At the same time, the Communist Party was banned and its members, who had put up resistance and spent time in concentration camps, were persecuted.

The fact that it took a West German head of state four decades to describe 8 May 1945 as "a day of liberation" is thus no great achievement, but rather a scandal.

In fact, Weizsäcker's speech made several concessions to those who continued to back Germany's great power ambitions and who, as he put it, felt "pain over the total defeat of their own fatherland" and were "embittered by shattered illusions."

"8 May is no day for we Germans to celebrate," he explained. "We have absolutely no reason to participate today in victory celebrations."

Weizsäcker's speech was less concerned with a reckoning with the past than it was with preparing political goals for the future. Weizsäcker, an experienced diplomat, knew that Germany had to distance itself from the crimes of the Third Reich if it was to once again play a role as a great power.

When he gave his speech, great change was in the air of which he was well aware. Two months earlier, Michael Gorbachev had been elected General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Less than five years later, the Berlin Wall fell.

Weizsäcker could not, of course, have foreseen all of these developments. However, he was firmly focused on German reunification when he spoke of World War II. "We Germans are one people and one nation," he commented, adding: "A new generation has grown up to take political responsibility. The younger ones are not responsible for what happened in the past."

Weizsäcker then oversaw German reunification as President. As German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and other leading German politicians loudly hailed Germany's renewed power, Weizsäcker assumed the responsibility of calming the alarmed governments of Britain, France and other countries. His 1985 speech played an important role in

this regard.

Richard von Weizsäcker was born into a family of state officials and diplomats in southern Germany in 1920. His grandfather, Karl Hugo Weizsäcker served the King of Württemberg from 1906 to 1918 as prime minister and in 1916, two years prior to the end of the Kaiser's empire, was elevated into his inherited nobility.

His father, Ernst von Weizsäcker, had a career from 1900 to 1918 as a navy officer, At the end of World War I, he held the rank of corvette captain and was part of the war leadership at the admiralty. In January 1919 he assisted in the flight of Horst von Pflugk-Harttung, who was involved in the murder of Karl Liebknecht.

Ernst von Weizsäcker joined the diplomatic service during the Weimar Republic, and the young Richard spent much of his youth in other countries, earning a certain degree of worldliness that served him well as German president. Among other places, he lived in Basel, Copenhagen, Oslo and Bern.

Under the Nazis, his father's career progressed swiftly. In 1937, clearly at Hitler's initiative, he was appointed to the foreign affairs ministry in Berlin. In 1938 he joined the Nazi party and the SS. From 1938 to 1943 he was assistant minister to Joachim von Ribbentrop and number two in the foreign ministry. In 1949 he was sentenced to five years in prison in Nuremberg for crimes against humanity, but was released a year later in a general amnesty.

Ernst's son Richard joined the Wehrmacht at the age of 18 in 1938. During the Second World War, he was an active soldier and officer from the first day to the last. In 1939 he participated in the invasion of Poland, where his older brother Heinrich died. In 1941 he was involved in Operation Barbarossa, the attack on the Soviet Union. He fought in the sieges of Moscow and Leningrad. He also served for a time at the headquarters of the army's supreme command.

Immediately after the war, Richard von Weizsäcker began studying law. He appeared in Nuremberg to defend his father, whose innocence he maintained throughout his life.

He was thus one of the most important defenders of the myth that leading officials, diplomats and generals who began their career in the pre-World War I German Empire or the Weimar Republic, and continued seamlessly under Hitler, had merely fulfilled their duty and were not responsible for the Nazis' crimes. Yet it was precisely these people who ensured until the bitter end that the state apparatus continued to run smoothly, imposing the Führer's will.

In fact, Weizsäcker's father firmly made up his mind early on to support the Nazi regime. Immediately following Hitler's assumption of power, in February 1933, he noted in his personal memoirs, "People like us have to support the

new era. Because what would come next if it fails! Of course it is also necessary with experience, and understanding of other countries and knowledge of life to stand ready. I am convinced of that."

Richard's brother, the well-known physician and philosopher Karl von Weizsäcker, turned to pacifism and became involved in campaigning against the nuclear arming of Germany. Richard joined the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in which a number of old Nazis were active.

During the 1950s and 1960s, he worked for several large companies, before concentrating on his political career from 1966. He was, among other things, a Bundestag deputy from 1969 to 1981, a leading participant in the drafting of the CDU's party programme adopted in 1978, and from 1981 to 1984, the governing mayor of Berlin.

At first glance, the current gushing praise for Weizsäcker seems surprising. The post which he held for 10 years has an overwhelmingly ceremonial character. With the exception of his three years as Berlin mayor, he never held an executive position. In addition, it is more than two decades since he left his post. Weizsäcker's glorification has more to do with the current political situation than with his actual role.

Weizsäcker, or in fact the idealised Weizsäcker, is needed to provide the aggressive reemergence of German imperialism with a pacifist mask. The latest German president and the government in Berlin have both pronounced the end of German military restraint. German foreign policy is once again pushing eastward and working with Nazi collaborators in Ukraine.

Against this background the chancellor in Berlin has become synonymous in Europe with German arrogance. Under these conditions the myth represented by Weizsäcker, i.e., that the German elites had reformed and broken with their previous traditions, serves the needs of both domestic and external propaganda.



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