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WORLD UNDERSTANDING OUR WORLD TODAY

Misplaced Fears

Germany is no strutting colossus.



PHOTOS The Walled-Off World

Jericho, Berlin, Belfast, and other great walls in history

By [Matt Frei](#) | NEWSWEEK

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After the Berlin Wall fell and the two Germans began grappling awkwardly with reunification, a joke made the rounds: "It's like the Beatles getting together again—let's just hope they don't go on another world tour!" British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and French President François Mitterrand blanched at the prospect of a strutting German colossus. But in hindsight, their fears turn out to have been wholly misplaced. Far from going on a global tour, the united Germany has been playing mainly to local audiences. The cliché in the 1960s, when West Germany experienced its postwar economic miracle, was that the country was an economic giant and a political dwarf. Twenty years after the toppling of the wall, not much has changed. *(Article continued below...)*

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Attitude Rollback: Young Russians Turn from the West

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The melding of the two countries created a nation of almost 90 million inhabitants, by far the biggest in the European Union and the world's second-largest exporter after China. But reunification was far more troubling and complex than one might have imagined: West Germany's takeover of the dilapidated East German state was like a python eating a sick poodle. The result was agonizing indigestion, which encouraged hibernation, not histrionics.

Unity made Germany more and not less introspective. The old German Democratic Republic was the ultimate nanny state. I still remember meeting my East German relatives for the first time a few weeks after the wall had fallen. Uncle Wolfgang, a successful electrician, was terrified of the freedoms that had just been foisted on him and his family. "What's going to happen to us now?" he muttered. In his address to the nation shortly after taking office, East Germany's last communist prime minister, a reformer named Hans Modrow, stated solemnly: "Comrades, do not worry, your allotments are safe!"

Those who assumed that a united Germany would return to its domineering reflexes failed to understand that the country's experience with regional fragmentation was longer and far happier than its brush with assertive nationalism. The country had been united only in 1871 under the Iron Chancellor, Bismarck. Since then it had spent 10 years fighting—and losing—two world wars and more than four decades divided. After 1945 the victorious Allies carved Germany into four sectors of occupation. The small, picturesque town of Bonn became the capital of the three Western sectors. The smoldering ruins of East Berlin became the capital of the Soviet sector of occupation. Everything was designed to fragment and downsize any future nationalist ambitions.

West Germany had a federal structure in which the

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west Germany had a federal structure in which the *Länder*, or states, which made up the *Bund*, or union, wielded considerable powers of taxation, transport, and education. Even German broadcasting was split up into regional sectors to prevent a centralized message machine from rising out of the ashes of Goebbels's propaganda monster. My father, who worked for Southwest German Broadcasting, once explained to me why German anchormen never used teleprompters: "It makes them seem all-knowing, superhuman, as if they can learn all that stuff by heart and look straight into your eyes. We don't want to deceive the audience."

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While many East Germans felt comfortable being nannied by the Communist Party, many West Germans felt cozy in the *Gemütlichkeit* of a federal state, where regional identity mattered and where the European Union was welcomed, not reviled, as a straitjacket. Helmut Kohl, the first chancellor of a united Germany and its principal architect, once enthused to me that the EU would guarantee that Germany could never step out of line again. Can you imagine a French or British head of government ever saying such a thing?

Parochialism is a byproduct of Germany's history—enshrined in the federal Constitution and embedded in the nation's DNA. Over time that position is going to become less and less tenable; it will be interesting to see, for example, how attitudes change if and when Barack Obama announces the next buildup of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and twists German arms to follow suit. But for now, Germany is very comfortable in the shadows. In 2006 Germany hosted the World Cup. The national team made it to the semifinals and then lost against Italy. The country was disappointed but not distraught. My mother put it like this: "It was such a wonderful World Cup. Germany really showed its best side." But, she told her disbelieving son, "actually I am glad we didn't get to the final and win. Had we come first it may have been too much for the world to stomach!"

Frei anchors BBC World News America weeknights on BBC America.

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Posted By: rhy164 @ 11/08/2009 8:34:40 PM

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I remember reading somewhere that the main thing the French require of their foreign policy is that it allows them to pretend that France matters. Looks like the Germans are taking the opposite approach currently.

Having seen photos and film showing German cities bombed and blasted into rubble, I can well imagine that "regional fragmentation" seems a happier and more comfortable situation than the "brush with assertive nationalism" that was the

Third Reich aberration. However I question how long Germany and the rest of Europe can continue to ignore the fact that, with its population and economy, it is obviously the "elephant in the room."

I can't believe that a people who have contributed so much to science, engineering, and Western culture, and have achieved so much economically will long continue to worry about appearing to do too well and thereby upsetting the neighbors. An assertive but not aggressive Germany seems a more desirable goal. There have to be a lot of Germans for which keeping a low profile will not prove very satisfying, and pent-up ambitions could prove very dangerous in time.

Posted By: rgquayle @ 11/05/2009 9:59:50 AM

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Matt Frei has achieved a masterstroke of understatement by conflating WWI & WWII into Germany???'s ???brush with assertive nationalism.??? That???'s like discussing Russia???'s brief flirtation with communism.

Posted By: Wahrheit @ 11/05/2009 8:39:15 AM

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Matt Frei describes a different country as used to life my whole life. I don,t think that the fears are misplaced. When germany gets a modern Hitler again. I am afraid, they start their world tour again. Hitler perished but his way of thinking lives on. (inferior, superior humanbeings or insekt=jews)

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