

'The German challenge' from Le Monde (23 December 1989)

Caption: On 23 December 1989, or a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the French newspaper Le Monde ponders the role of reunified Germany within the Europe of the Twelve.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FONTAINE, André. 23.12.1989, n° 13 967; 46e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Le défi allemand", p. 1.

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The German challenge

‘The German question will remain open as long as the Brandenburg Gate remains closed.’ This epithet was uttered in 1984 by Richard von Weizsäcker, the then Mayor of West Berlin who later became President of the Federal Republic. The two 15-foot wide holes in the wall on either side of the Gate mark a new stage in the resolution of the ‘German problem’ which has been playing itself out over the course of the Cold War. Although History has been fast-forwarded, causing some elation amongst Germans in both the east and west, what 40 years of division have created by way of reflexes that have become a habit and even a source of comfort cannot be wiped out overnight. This applies to the Germans themselves as well as to their neighbours and allies.

Everyone more or less agrees in principle: the German nation will be united because the Germans want it. This is what François Mitterrand reasserted during his visit to the GDR. It is also the firm belief in NATO and of President Bush. The objections and warnings coming from Moscow are tactics rather than fundamental opposition. The famous ‘German card’ will not be played recklessly or without strong safeguards by a Mikhail Gorbachev anxious to remain on good terms with the military, whose support is vital to him.

Some West German political leaders, such as the former Chancellor, Willy Brandt, insist that reunification is not the ultimate goal. The word smacks too much of the old order which, twice this century, brought suffering to Europe and the entire world. Germany, it is true, still strikes fear, not by its military strength but by the threat of destabilisation resulting from its economic hegemony. The economic and monetary union of the FRG and the GDR will very likely precede political union.

This presents a challenge to a European Community that is struggling to push forward with Jacques Delors’ grand design. The single market, monetary union and a central bank are all elements of a still shaky edifice that have to be rapidly put in place if we want to keep Germany from being tempted to go it alone.

Circumstances are favourable. The overwhelming majority of political leaders are convinced that the country can be unified only as part of a more united, more generous Europe.

The rearguard action led by Margaret Thatcher, who is still defending positions that have been overtaken by events, will tend to lead our German neighbours to close in on themselves, on their resources and on their re-acquired national consciousness. When that happens, we really shall have reason to fear a Germany whose aggression still feeds on its cult of being different.