After The War and After The Wall:
British Perceptions of Germany Following 1945 and 1989

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British reactions to the prospect of German Unification in 1989 and to that of an even stronger Germany revealed that at least part of the British public still perceived Germany through notions and stereotypes based on the wartime experience. At the end of the 20th century, while Germany and the whole world were opening new chapters in history, Britain seemed more resistant to change than generally would be expected. By focusing on British attitudes towards Germany after 1945, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this paper provides a brief history of the British perception of Germany from the end of World War II. The aim of the paper is twofold: to identify the origins of negative images of Germany in Britain; and furthermore, to examine the legitimacy of the widely accepted view that Britain has adopted a lasting negative attitude towards Germany.

The German Abnormality

In the spring of 1945, the revelations of the details surrounding the Holocaust and the atrocities perpetrated in the concentration camps came as a shock to the international community. By then, two generations of British people had witnessed the aggressive policies of Wilhelmian and Hitlerite Germany. For them, the memories of the two World Wars were too vivid to be forgotten; seen alongside the cruel Nazi crimes they also seemed inexplicable. The only plausible answer, to this traumatic experience, lay in the belief that there was a special element in the German psyche that drove Germans almost without will to these catastrophic actions. It is in this context that the concept of a German abnormality gained momentum, burdening with its stigma the country's image for the years to follow.

Some looked to find the origins of this abnormality in the very character of the German people. "Those Germans, they're just not human", declared a sixty-year-old Englishwoman, who was certainly not alone in her beliefs.[1] "The Germans have a sadistic trait in them, and delight in the sufferings of other races" pronounced one Londoner.[2] Stephen Spender, visiting Germany in 1945, agreed with other critics in that there was:

> *a special kind of German suggestibility – willingness to obey orders, thinking in generalisations, the search for panaceas, faith in power, which made many Germans capable of falling to deeper depths than many people of other nations.*[3]

The "otherness" of German qualities was frequently stated in a way that re-affirmed the superior nature of the British through binary opposites: normality *versus* perversion, goodness *versus* evil, civilisation *versus* barbarism and so on.[4] This form of discourse was based on theories of racial characteristics which were relatively popular in the first half of the 20th century, and especially so amongst the Nazis. However, no one at that time would accept any kind of correlation of this kind.

But for those who wished to understand the reasons underlying Germany's troubled history, and who were not convinced by such unscientific generalisations, the old *Sonderweg* theory provided a helpful theoretical framework. The idea of a German *Sonderweg* (alternative way) was originally coined by German academics in the 19th century in order to explain Germany's unique vitality and its promising development.[5] All that was now required was for the theory to be reversed in order to provide a seemingly reasonable

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explanation for Germany's misconduct. All features of German history and culture were seen again through this idea of the alternative, German way. The distinguished historian AJP Taylor blamed Martin Luther for causing disunity amongst the various German states, for reaffirming "the German nationalist sense of being different", and for persuading the people that it was their Christian duty to obey the orders of their rulers.

Nationalism and militarism were easily redefined from being features of the Nazi régime to those of Germany in general. As Roy Pascal wrote in 1946:

> *In the case of Germany it was only too inviting, in the period of the Weimar Republic, to see German history as the development of democracy; and today, after authoritarian leaders have once again led an enthusiastic people in a war of expansion, German history may seem to be the history of aggressive nationalism.[6]*

Nationalism was blamed for being the ideological power behind the extreme manifestations of German aggression in the previous decades. It was seen as a widespread cultural phenomenon, supported in various ways by the most diverse German intellectual figures, first of all by Martin Luther himself![7] It was common at that time to compare the rational western "Civilization" to the mystical German "*Kultur*", and to refer to Wagner or Nietzsche as being as equally responsible as Hitler, for the rise and the excesses of German nationalism.[8] Germany's traditional image as a warrior nation was also quickly recalled. The wars between Romans and Germans, the Thirty Years War, the Franco-Prussian conflict in 1870-1871 were all frequently cited and often simultaneously. The First World War image of Prussian militarism (the central role of the army in the running of most state affairs) was also recalled. This having already been elaborated and accepted as a fact by the older generations. "Prussia, not Germany, is the real, perhaps the implacable, enemy", was an argument commonly heard during the war years.[9]

Germany's special geographical position was another reason often cited in order to explain German aggression. This was the same argument behind the *Lebensraum* (vital space) theory, on which the Nazis based their aggressive policies towards their neighbours. Germany lies at the centre of the European continent and has a large population second only to that of Russia. The east and the west had always appealed to the German states as alternative routes to survival. This idea of turning Germany's geographical characteristics into a determining reason for its eternal, aggressive quest for expansion is an explanation that leaves little space for optimism for the future. If that theory is true, then the Germans are bound to strive for expansion eastwards for ever, or until the geographical features of the region change dramatically, which is a very distant prospect. However, the country's postwar multiple partition soon made this line of thought quite irrelevant.

The answer that appeared most convincing to both intellectuals and statesmen of the period, and with which the *Sonderweg* idea became most closely identified, rested upon the view that Germany had lagged behind in the development of its political institutions and culture. The leading role of the western democracies in defeating Nazism in 1945 had reconfirmed their belief of the superiority of their form of political system. In Britain, a nation which regarded itself as home to capitalist, modern parliamentary democracy, the answer to the question of German "abnormality" was obvious. Germany had proven to be incapable of modernising itself according to the Western paradigm; a belief that one prominent German, Max Weber, had already accepted at the beginning of the century.[10] The dramatic, short history of the Weimar republic was often cited as the clearest example of this German deficiency.

Despite the extreme opinions frequently expressed vis-à-vis Germany at this time, in comparison with the rest of the Allies, the British adopted a position which some regarded as indicative of a kind of moral superiority.[11] In 1945, the Institute of Sociology published a

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book on "The German Mind and Outlook", in which various scientists attempted to distinguish "the myths, the types and the propaganda" in their perception of the German people.[12] It asked the public not to subscribe to oversimplification despite the conflict and, in accordance to the popular discourse of racial characteristics, it stressed that the Germans were a "gifted, efficient, hard-working, disciplined, romantic, unstable, inflammable and formidable nation".[13] "The older ones are much like ourselves; the young ones have been brought up to this idea of complete domination", said one British female to a *Mass Observation* interviewer, seemingly trying to rationalise the perplexed feelings emanating from the war experience.[14] When the Nazi crimes of the concentration camps were revealed, one reader of the *The Manchester Guardian* wrote:

> *When the war is over and the time for action comes I pray that those who lead the world into peace may look for, find and make use of those good Germans in Germany. They do exist.[15]*

New Qualities for the German People
As the war drew to a close, the allies faced the future with as much agony as they faced the past. Of priority was the reconstruction of Europe together with the maintenance of peace and stability. Germany lay at the heart of the problem since its administration and future status was now under the responsibility of the Allies. If Germany remained destabilised for too long, it would be as equally impossible for the surrounding central European countries to feel safe and prosper. Such an outcome would seriously undermine the recently and so painfully gained peace, as was noted by *The Manchester Guardian* in April 1945:

> *It is in no sense out of softness towards the Germans that their self-disrupted lives must now be organised by the Allies. This task of Military Government is vital in hastening the end of the war and vital in creating the practical fabric of peace[16]*

Despite the practical reasons for German reconstruction, some people in Britain as well as elsewhere were not ready to accept such a rapid rehabilitation. One could only too often hear voices calling for Germany's de-industrialisation and transformation into an agricultural state or for the permanent division of Germany into many small states. Of those British asked "what should be done to Germany after the war?" only 7% opted for a "constructive" settlement; 28% were for "revengeful" solution and 44 for a "preventative" one.[17]

However, in the aftermath of its total defeat Germany appeared desolated in "misery, disease and starvation".[18] Reports on the devastating conditions in the territories of the defeated Reich quickly reached the British press. This offered the outside world an alternative image to counterbalance the one that represented Germans as evil and abnormal. The images of misery and desolation emanating from Germany gradually softened the attitude of the British public, which saw itself as morally superior to the vengeful Germans; somewhat illustrated by a comment made by a member of the public in February 1948:

> *I have a complex about the Germans; pity for their misery […] pleasure when I think what they brought to the rest of Europe. But the Germans will always hate us.[19]*

By the summer of 1947, almost half of those asked, had no ill feeling towards the Germans.[20] The Germans were merely regarded as the "spoiled children in need of a strong leader" which the British intended to provide.[21] This was "Zero Hour" for Germany and the beginning of the re-education program. As one of the leading nations, Britain had a moral obligation to insure the future development of countries around the world. And if Germany

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was going to be powerful again, then it would be because Britain had decided and allowed it to become so.

If the first half of the 20th century had been consumed in dealing with the "German Problem", the second half of it was dominated by the "Communist Threat". With the advent of the Cold War Germany once again became the battlefield albeit in an imagined sense. Berlin was situated at the centre of some of the most important incidents of this confrontation. Berlin's blockade in 1948, the East Berlin uprising in 1953, and finally, the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 were followed with interest by Britain and the international community in general at the time and during the years which followed. The representation of Germany in other countries suddenly acquired another aspect. In addition to the ambivalent view of Germans as the barbaric troublemakers of Europe, and/or the human wrecks of a great catastrophe, they were now also reported to be "the innocent victims of rivalry among their conquerors".[22] The Soviet Union, one of the biggest victims of Nazi Germany, became the new threat and everything had to be done to combat this new menace; Germany was now an ally.

> *Two years ago it was still just possible to think of a third German aggression as the most likely future source of trouble. Today Germany is a menace only on one condition – that it becomes drawn into the Russian orbit and its millions pass under Communist Control", wrote The Economist at the beginning of 1949.[23]*

Germany needed to be urgently reconstructed as a bulwark to the Soviet threat.[24] The prevailing view concerning the errors of Germany's past was given credence and used as the basis for plans regarding the country's future. If the problem consisted of Germany's incomplete knowledge of democracy, liberalism and capitalism, the allies believed that the solution involved the education of the German people in this respect. They would do what the German bourgeoisie should have done some time ago. The answer to the problem of Germany's past provided the key to its future. Germany would "be drawn, closely and at last contentedly, into the western orbit".[25] It was only in the early 1980s that the validity of this system of assumptions associated with the *Sonderweg* theory was questioned for the first time by the British historians David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, and thereafter gradually abandoned.[26] Nonetheless, Germany, or at least its Western part, did finally follow the western paradigm and soon proved to more successful than its educators in this respect. With the support of the western allies, Germany recovered astonishingly quickly, rapidly giving rise to speculation about the "German economic miracle".

In contrast to what had happened after the end of World War I, the German people now seemed to have "swung from one extreme – of political fanaticism and violence – into passivity and apathy".[27] Even AJP Taylor, who had so passionately argued in the aftermath of World War II on the German abnormality, noted in 1955 that "perhaps the days of German greatness have vanished for good. An independent Germany […] may find herself much on the level of any other country".[28] Germany's conformity to the main guidelines of the allies seemed to be satisfactory enough.[29] It was so persistent in resisting participation in the NATO alliance that *The Manchester Guardian* expressed its doubts that Bonn would ever be capable of recruiting the necessary men for the new German army.[30] The view that Germans had actually changed, that they had abandoned excessiveness, and had discovered efficiency, was gradually gaining currency. Under the urging necessities of Cold War, the Nazi past fell progressively into a form of oblivion, and the "de-nazification" process of German society and its political establishment was soon abandoned by the British and their Allies.

Germany's new achievements were received as a positive development by parts of the British establishment and general public. Principally, for the fact that the ordeal for the German people was over. Many certainly took pride in Germany's success, since it was seen

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as the best proof of Britain's magnanimity, and as a result of the successful British administration and guidance during the first years following the war. "When I recall my feelings, as a soldier with the liberating army, entering and surveying Belsen concentration camp, I am amazed by, and rejoice in, the charity shown to the German people by the Western Allies after the war" declared a reader of *The Economist* in 1954.[31] Furthermore, a strong Germany was considered as an important bulwark against any plans of Moscow for a westward expansion. West Germany's prosperity was seen as a clear manifestation of liberal democracy's superiority over communism.

Still, Germany's progress was not all good news for Britain. While the former was improving year by year its financial and political status, the latter was showing a worrying inability to recover from its wartime exhaustion. In 1958 Germany took Britain's place as the world's second largest exporter. In the same time the Suez crisis, decolonization and the various internal socio-economic problems of the country signalled the rapid decline of Britain from the status of an international superpower. And as the years passed the situation seemed to be getting even worse. "Today we are not only no longer a world power, but we are not in the first rank even as a European one" stated a British ambassador in the late 1970s.[32] United States had long now taken the role of the guardian of Western-capitalist world that Great Britain had before World War II. The shift in Britain's international status became ever so clear in the adventure of its application for membership to the European Economic Community. Britain's application was turned down twice by de Gaulle, in 1963 and 1967, before it became a member in 1973 alongside Ireland and Denmark. In 1973, Britain faced Germany once again, but at the political level, and as a partner in the circles of the EEC. However, being a founding member of the Community, and with a more powerful economy than that of Britain, Germany was actually in the stronger position.

Admitting Germany's development was too much for all those who found it difficult to accept the parallel decline of Britain's power. Hence many either denied the extent of the German success or attributed it mainly to the help that the Allies offered to the country after the war. "Those of us who have had some contact with the German people recognise their great qualities and their capacity for hard work. At the same time it appears that German powers of self-deception are almost limitless; […] The credit that Dr Erhard himself takes for the great success of the export programme leads him to deny the enormous effort made on behalf of Western Germany by the three Western Allies."[33]

At the same time, Bonn was itself interested in stressing to the international community that its prowess should not be overestimated. Highly conscious of the fears and the suspicion that its renewed strength would provoke all around Europe, Bonn was very careful that its new image would not evoke any memories of the past. In 1952 *The Economist* was already reporting that "the Germans belittle their strength" by campaigning to prove that their prosperity was not so great as it seemed.[34] The amazing achievement of its economic recovery soon resulted in the identification of Germany with totally new qualities. The economic miracle of the 1950s seemed to be the culmination of economic and technical development that had started in the second half of the 19th century.[35] Public opinion, in post-war Western Europe, soon accepted the idea that the "West Germans abandoned excessiveness and discovered efficiency", despite the country's unimpressive records in most other aspects of its public life.[36]

Germany was now regarded as a true democracy, and as one of the least militaristic countries in the world. Even the images of the methodical and hard working German were partially obscured.

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Hard work was a mania in the early fifties but the Germans – I am pleased to report – do not work harder than the British and that's quite something", mentioned a publication of the German embassy in 1973.[37]

Most of all, however, Germany was interested in placing aside any bitter encounters with its recent past. Ever since the war, Germany had experienced an "agonising concern about its national identity", which led to a delicate "forging the nation" debate.[38] Referred to by Mary Fulbrook in 1989 as a state of "collective amnesia",[39] this strategy was surprisingly adopted by the rest of the world as well. Germany was an advancing, but peaceful power, playing a key role, and especially so in the European affairs. The rest of Europe refrained from discussing Germany's past, if not in order to help the country to build a new and healthy identity, then so as to ensure that the flow German capital remained uncomprimised. "Don't mention the war", as John Cleese remarks immediately before welcoming a group of German tourists to his hotel in the comedy series "Fawlty Towers" in 1975.[40]

United Germany

The partition of Germany formed a constant reminder of the division of Europe into two opposing camps. Consequently, there was genuine euphoria to news of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and described by one British person as "one of the most joyful events ever witnessed by the world".[41] Germany's image gained an attribute that had been lacking ever since the war, that of being the centre in which some of Europe's most memorable political developments were taking place.[42] But soon Bonn's plans for German Unification, which it realised in 1990, focused attention upon a new and vigorous Germany, determined, if anything else, to decide its own future. A new era beckoned with the Germany appearing as the most dominant West-European nation. As news of German Unification reached Britain and the rest of the world, the memory of Germany's past still appeared to be the determining factor in public attitude.

"It seems that we will have to start our German history lessons all over again, rehearsing the arguments that were commonplace among previous generations", noted Richard Gott.[43]

Many arguments of the *Sonderweg* theory re-appeared.

"Those who believe in enduring national characteristics will always fear some confluence of events luring Germany towards a new extremism from which it will be incapable of retreating", warned The Economist[44].

The country's geographical position came to the fore of public attention as soon as news of the alleged problems at the Polish borderline arrived in Britain. "The Germans are trapped by history and geography […] in the centre of Europe and, when united, will have a weight hard to balance".[45] Neo-Nazi murderous attacks against *Gastarbeiter* (foreign workers) and asylum-seekers also led many people to talk of a revived wave of German nationalism. The return of the Prussian element as a determining factor in German political and cultural life was seen as especially worrying. Ahead of plans to move the German capital from Bonn to Berlin *The Economist* wondered whether this would signify "a Germany thrown back on Prussian ways".[46] There was widespread fear that unified Germany would stress the great potentialities of the German nation, and at the same time, would try to revise the infamous moments of its history. "The rewriting of modern German history is now taking place in daily life, not only in academia" *The Guardian* was warning.[47]

Prominent British politicians openly expressed their dislike of a united Germany. Margaret Thatcher was the only head of a European country to candidly assert her

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disagreement to Helmut Kohl's plans, giving the impression of being, in her own words, "an unreconstructed Germano-phobe to boot".[48] In July 1990, in an interview to the *Spectator*, the Trade and Industry Secretary Nicholas Ridley spoke passionately against Germany's hegemony in the EEC and the control it practised over the European economy. He criticised the French as being the "poodles" of the Germans, and declared that the British would not let themselves be bossed around by the Germans.[49] Some days later, *The Independent* published secret minutes of a meeting at Chequers in March 1990, between the Prime Minister and distinguished British and American historians, and which discussed the new developments taking place in Germany. The greatest interest and criticism of the leaked memo concerned a list of certain historical characteristics of the German people. These were listed in alphabetical order: "*Angst*, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, sentimentality".[50]

There was a common feeling that Germany had just realised its old plans for European domination, against which Britain had fought two world wars. It did not take much for those who were negatively disposed towards Germany to rediscover the Reich in the modified form of the EEC. A united Germany financially, culturally and politically controlled its neighbours and played a dominant role in the EEC, through which it even influenced Britain's internal affairs. In 1997, the Oxford historian Niall Ferguson noted that Germany's plan in World War I was to create "a version of the European Union, eight decades ahead of schedule". The fact that it had finally succeeded in its aim led him to conclude that Britain should have in the first place accepted a "German victory on the continent", avoiding in that way "the massive contraction in British overseas power entailed by the fighting of two world wars".[51] Ferguson actually referred to a way of re-examining the past which had been relatively common amongst the British public since Unification. He viewed British and German history of the last hundred years in a comparative way, and felt that despite all odds, at the end of the century Germany was finally in the exact position which Britain had occupied a hundred years earlier.

Of course, it was not only Britain that reluctantly accepted the new unified Germany. Margaret Thatcher claimed that the French and Soviet Presidents, François Mitterrand and Mikhail Gorbachev, shared her views. Moreover, she contended that although they traditionally "made statements supporting Germany's aspiration to be reunited, in practice we were rather apprehensive".[52] Even from within Germany, there were many voices warning of the dangers of a united Germany, with that of Günter Grass being the most prominent. *The Guardian* cited from his latest book in 1990.

> *The way in which the Chancellor has exercised his power seems to echo Bismarck - as if the Prussian aristocracy's politics of steel and blood had actually benefited the Germans and their neighbours.*[53]

All these reactions were covered extensively by the British press. In particular, French fears of a unified Germany were quite often reported. This suggests that the British press may have been attempting to pass the blame of Germanophobia onto its French counterparts, especially given the volatile history of Franco-German relations. As Gordon Craig wrote suggestively in 1982,

> *the French, in particular, have been adamant in their conviction that the Germans never change and their intermittent suspicion that a reversion to the bad old past […] is not only possible but likely.*[54]

In the meantime, however, the cautious attitude of Germany encouraged the rest of Europe to begin its co-existence with a united Germany without substantial fear. In 1996, it was a French sports daily *L' Equipe* which commented that the British press coverage of the

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England-Germany match made one feel "as if Germany had never made peace with the Allies. It was almost as if they once again bombed London with their V1s".[55] The British were gradually acquiring an image of a nation that refused most passionately and unreasonably to regard the Germans in a modern, flexible and forgiving way. In 1990, *The Guardian* reported:

> *Mrs Thatcher's initial attempt to thwart unification rankles more in Germany than President Mitterrand's opportunistic overtures to the old regime in East Germany, or Andreotti's frequently quoted speech about the dangers of pan-Germanism.*[56]

Bonn has launched a PR blitz on London", reported *The Observer* in 1996, and further added that:

> *Bonn has instructed its diplomats and press officers to convince the British media that Germans are not, to pick some recent insults, greedy, hypocritical jack-booted thugs bent on creating a Fourth Reich in Europe.*[57]

Germany's image in Britain remained as unappealing as ever.

It should be acknowledged that the press stressed the anti-German reactions because they made sensational news. Evidently, this does not imply that all of the British public shared these opinions. "Hitler, Klinsman, Mataus. Don't know any other footballers", was the answer of a pupil in a survey which revealed that Hitler was the best known German figure amongst British schoolchildren.[58] Substantial parts of British public opinion and the establishment, such as the Foreign Office, already acknowledged and even supported the inevitable merging of the two Germanies.[59] This was partly due to sheer pragmatism. "Britain must accept a united Germany as an equal or sink its sovereignty in an integrated continent", noted *The Guardian*.[60] The alternative, modern image that Bonn had advocated for all the previous decades was gaining ground, supported by the facts themselves. "Berlin; a city shadowed by a tragic past but clearly set for a bright future", ran the caption of a holiday brochure, advertising in 1992 holiday trips to the new German capital.[61] According to an opinion poll in January 1990, those British opposed to the Unification of Germany comprised only thirty percent of people questioned. Nevertheless, even in this case their number was double that of their French counterparts.[62]

German *Sonderweg* or An *Alternative Way* for the British?

It has often been contended that the negative image of Germany in Britain is most likely to be reproduced by people having lived through the war.[63] Interestingly, a *Mass Observation's* survey in 1990 revealed that all but two of those who expressed any reservations ahead of German Unification were born in the inter-war years, their average age being sixty-three.[64] Understandably enough, the older generations are more likely to try to judge the future according to their experiences of the past. But the roots of the problem are not simply confined to certain historical connotations which naturally influence the views of the older sections of the population. The mechanisms of collective memory seemed much more persistent than would be expected. The public, especially in the years after the war, formulated its views through the new mass media culture. And that, alongside the plethora of personal experiences of those who lived through the war made sure that images of Hitler and Nazism were kept very much alive in public discourse. Films, fiction books and even children's games recalled only too often the hated icon of the German soldier.[65] "It was one of Rocky's films. He was playing and the Germans got him and they kept on getting their knives and kept on shaving him" said a nine-year-old boy when asked to mention the sources of the negative opinion he had of the Germans.[66]

Hitler remains the most known German not only among the old war veterans but also among their grandchildren. In 1996 the *Goethe Institut* in London carried out a survey among British pupil between the ages of 14 and 16 asking them who were their ten most well known Germans, living or dead. Adolf Hitler was by far at the top of the list, which also contained the names of Joseph Goebbels and Heinrich Goering.[67] A survey of British schoolchildren in 1995 found that "when it came to desirable foreign destinations, Germany was bottom of the list. They would rather go to Bosnia".[68] The Germano-phobic discourse of the British public consists of a plethora of images, notions and stereotypes, transmitted in all levels of the society through a variety of media. "Last week, a report by Professor Pere Salva of the University of the Balearics officially told what many British holidaymakers already know. In Mallorca it is now easier to get a plate of sauerkraut than a cup of tea. Some British tabloids reported this invasion of "our" resorts as yet more evidence of German domination of Europe", reported *The Guardian* in May 1996. It seems that old stereotypes demonstrate an incredible ability to reinvent themselves continuously through time.[69]

For Germany, the Unification of 1990 seemed to signal the end of the most painful consequence of defeat in 1945; that of its division. Many in the country declared that the Germans had by now paid for the responsibility of provoking the war, and that they should now be permitted to look to the future without having to be burdened with the past. Indeed, the policy of the Kohl government had already began to set the way in this respect. However, significant voices inside Germany warned of the dangers of the prospect of a united Germany, and were extensively reported back in Britain. Five years after Unification even *The Observer* interestingly recalled that Günter Grass had declared in 1990 "that Auschwitz had robbed Germans of the right to national normality".[70] Writing in 1991 on the *Historikerstreit* - the heated debates on German history between German intellectuals which Jürgen Habermas himself described in 1996 as part of a process leading to the "intentional 'normalization' of [the Germans'] historical and political understanding" - Mary Fulbrook adopted the same discourse on German normality.[71] She asked whether the Germans should "construct a new sense of national pride", becoming a "normal nation" or whether they should never "normalize" their past and hence "relativize" it.[72] Questioning the right of the Germans to perceive themselves as a normal nation, both the media and intellectuals in Britain seemed to reaffirm the postwar popular belief in the German abnormality. At the critical moment, few proved themselves ready to accept that Germany had changed and that it should be accepted into the international community as such. John Major's invitation to Germany in 1994 to participate in the "Victory in Europe" celebrations in Britain the following year prompted many reactions as an attempt to forge history. "It's is an example of how the coinage of history can be debased by politicians. It represents a kind of easy trading in reconciliation that doesn't so much insult the memory of those who died in the war as wander ignorantly past it", bitterly noted *The Guardian*.[73]

Six years after Unification, the liberal *Guardian,* noted that Germany "burdened by its past and fearful of the future", was becoming "a nation of neurotics". It went on by reporting the views of a young German woman, Karin: "Karin does not want to be German. She insists on speaking English and admits with an unGerman directness that she would rather be an American or a Briton. France, too, is infinitely preferable to Germany. Karin is not exactly typical in wanting to deny her national identity. But nor is she exceptional".[74] After WWII British soldiers, the press, and the public compared the perverse qualities of Nazi Germany to that of a healthy and victorious Britain, thereby constructing British pride and self-confidence. Through its persistent post-Unification regurgitation of a seemingly self-indulging discourse, the British press was not only unjust to the German people, but also damaged prospects of European understanding and co-operation. Moreover, it is revealing of

the anxiety emanating from certain elements of British public opinion at the end of the 20th century, and of the attendant attempt to reaffirm Britain's qualities as a morally superior and victorious nation in comparison to the big European rival, Germany.

Amongst those who did not share the same feelings for the German people, the negative representation of Germany was simply regarded as an expression of a deep socio-political crisis inside Britain itself. Its decline as a world power, "the fragmentation of the British Isles" and the country's uncertain position in the prospect of European integration, were facts that could be seen as reasons influencing many British to turn towards a sentimental discourse which was rooted in a glorious past.[75] Writing for the *Mass Observation* archive, a forty-two year old Englishwoman explained the whole problem as a sign of a more general crisis of British national identity, due to the decline of Britain's international status. As earlier symptoms of the same cause, she indicated the creation of the "useless Commonwealth", Britain's "brokerage role between the United States and Europe and the "sabre rattling of the Falklands dispute".[76] In the article "Angst on German unity reflects economic reality", *The Guardian* stated, even more pragmatically, that Britain had retreated to its anti-German rhetoric as a reaction to the prospect of a united Germany, dominating Europe and determining the pace of its economic and political development.[77]

In the 1990s the British seemed to recreate the same kind of mentality as the one they had shared after the war when they saw their victory over the Nazis as a verification of their moral, cultural and socio-political superiority to the Germans.[78] But half a century after the end of the war their contemporary reality did not offer any justification to similar claims. Britain at this point, despite the positive reactions to these changes from diverse elements of its society, gave the general impression that it held a negative stance, probably *the* most pejorative in Western Europe at least. The notion of German abnormality still seemed to be the dominant one amongst the British public, determining its perception of Germany and its people. However, the facts themselves – Unification and growth of Germany to the status of the main European power – actually reveal a nation that gradually but effectively seems to have surpassed the last obstacles that its alleged *Sonderweg* put in its way. At the end of the Twentieth Century, by refusing to accept the changing international realities and its role within, Britain ironically seems to have begun transforming itself into to the 'European abnormality'.[79] Europe-phobia, Germano-phobia and the projection of redundant stereotypes, all lead to the same question. Is Britain faced with its own *Sonderweg*?

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1. Mass Observation, FR 2248 *German Atrocities* May 1945, p.2.
2. Mass Observation, FR 2248 *German Atrocities* May 1945, pp.1-10.
3. Spender Stephen *European Witness* (London, 1946) p.162.
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