

# FIELDS: Germany comes of age

Guilt is giving way to growing sense of relief

By Suzanne Fields - *The Washington Times* - Wednesday, October 5, 2011

## ANALYSIS/OPINION:

### BERLIN

United Germany turned 21 this week. Families celebrated a three-day weekend, with the children waving black, red and gold national flags in the bright sunlight of an unseasonal October summer in Berlin. In Bonn, the capital of West Berlin when Germany was divided into the Soviet East and free West, fireworks flashed across the night sky.

Unification has not been without problems, and the conventional wisdom is that it's been harder on Germans in the East, where unemployment is almost double that in the West. But it's difficult to find a German who would return the communists to power. In fact, the fall of the Wall, which is celebrated on Nov. 9, usually draws bigger celebratory crowds. But the date falls on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, "the night of the broken glass," when on Nov. 9, 1938, Nazi thugs smashed Jewish homes, burned synagogues and broke out the glass windows of Jewish shopkeepers all across Germany. Delicacy prevented the date's being taken as the official holiday of German unification.

This year's unity celebration follows Angela Merkel's resounding victory in the Bundestag, the endorsement of her decision to increase Germany's contribution to the eurozone rescue fund. The debate was fierce and will remain a continuing challenge to the government. Many Germans, like others in Northern Europe, resent paying for the high life of profligate Greeks in their Dionysian disarray. Peter Altmaier, chief whip of the Christian Democratic Union, the lead party in Mrs. Merkel's coalition, told the Financial Times, "A huge majority is a very strong signal to Europe, the financial markets and America that Germany is ready to resume its responsibility [in the eurozone crisis]."

It's difficult to recall how a wary world feared a unified Germany 21 years ago. There were fears that a militaristic nation that had plunged the world into world wars twice in the 20th century had not really learned its expensive lesson. But times change. Four years in a row, Germany has been ranked as the most popular country in the world in a survey taken by the BBC of 30,000 people in 27 countries. A popularity contest is rarely about power, but it's an irony, nevertheless, that Germany is the poster country for peace and popularity.

This might be a source of pride, but it was hardly reported, discussed or debated in Germany. Germans are rightly sensitive to the judgment of history and generally are reluctant to say positive things about themselves lest their criminal past be thrown in their faces. Such sensitivity affects the way they act.

In a lecture titled "Germany Has Come of Age," Gunter Nooke, who for five years was the German human rights commissioner for policy, argues that it's time to change that self-perception. Germans, he says, should build on an understanding of their whole history and speak out clearly on political positions in which they once were vulnerable.

"Even the terrible crimes of the Germans, for which we as Germans will always bear responsibility, do not negate our freedom to make decisions," he told the German Historical Institute in Washington. "They no longer provide us with a justification for refraining from getting involved."

Berlin has approved the design of a monument to commemorate both the peaceful 1989 revolution and German reunification. The sculpture captures a blithe new German spirit, called the "Citizens' Movement." The monument is an enormous 330-ton steel dish that can accommodate 1,400 persons. The dish moves with the movement of those in it, but only if a minimum of 20 people are aboard. The idea is that the well-being of the community needs the engagement and cooperation of its citizens. This is not merely symbolic, because the dish depends on the weight of its participants to get it in full swing.

Critics call it a playground for grown-ups, lacking the gravitas of history, but its defenders say it reflects both the surge of relief at the fall of the Wall and the new sense of responsibility that accompanies freedom and unification. It will occupy a square in front of the proposed reconstruction of the Prussian

Palace, where the original was torn down to build the parliament building of the communist government of East Berlin. It was here that a million Germans gathered to demand the destruction of the Wall.

From this perspective, the movement of heavy industrial steel requiring the push of the people represents the seesaw on which the mix and flux of modern Germany rests. It will bear inscriptions that were popular slogans in the peaceful revolution of 1989 that brought down the Wall: "We are the people," and "We are one." That's enough to celebrate.

*Suzanne Fields is a syndicated columnist.*

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