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A problem called Germany

Europe's biggest problem is Germany, not Greece. Just over two years ago (May, 2013) I published a piece entitled "The German Diktat", in which I listed the justifications given by Germany at the beginning of the First World War for its atrocities against Belgium, a small country that had refused to go along with Germany's bellicose plans. The inordinately cruel way in which Germany is now exacting revenge for an act of disobedience on the part of Greece – another small country – forces us to take a fresh look at Europe's recent history and use that to rethink our common future. This is not about resuscitating long-buried demons, still less is it about bringing back anti-German feelings that could only backfire and set off philo-German sentiment, anyway. It happened seventy years ago and the ensuing debates have proved little help for the European (and non-European) peoples that ended up massacred by a vicious war. My aim is simply to review the solutions that were offered to solve the German problem after the Second World War, to analyze their shortcomings, and to try and imagine new, viable solutions.

The problem with Germany has always been that it is too big for Europe and too small for the world. On the one hand, the expansionism of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires; on the other, one of the smallest European colonial powers, whose colonial period (1884-1919) not only was short-lived, but, unlike other European powers, failed to pass on

its mother tongue to the colonized. Leaving aside the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), bred by Bismarck's desire to unify Germany under the aegis of Prussia and by France's fear that such a move might allow Germany to hold excessive sway over Europe, Germany's bellicose arrogance in the two World Wars of the last century caused unprecedented devastation. Sixty million people – 3% of the world population at the time – died in the Second World War alone. The solution that was found in 1945 to contain the German problem consisted of dividing Germany into two parts, one under Soviet, the other under Western control. The solution proved effective for as long as the Cold War lasted. With the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and Germany's subsequent reunification a new solution had to be found.

Let us keep in mind that the reunification of Germany was not conceived of as a new state (as many Democrats in East Germany would have it) but rather as an extension of West Germany. This led to the belief that the solution had been there all along, since the establishment of the European Economic Community (later European Union) in 1957, with West Germany as a participant, and the aim, among others, of containing extreme German nationalism. The truth is that this solution was to operate with automatic efficiency as long as Germany remained divided. After reunification, however, it would be contingent on Germany's self-restraint. Over the last twenty five years this self-restraint was the third pillar of European integration, the other two being consensus in decisions and gradual convergence of European countries. The way in which the EU was gradually "deepened" served to show that the first two pillars were beginning to give in, while the creation of the euro dealt the final blow to the pillar of convergence. The Greek crisis is of the utmost importance in that it clearly shows that the third pillar has also collapsed. We must give

the Greek people the tragic credit for making it plain to the rest of Europe that Germany is incapable of self-restraint. As a matter of fact, Germany has squandered the second chance it was given back in 1957. The German problem is back and does not bode well. And if Germany is incapable of self-restraint, European countries must act fast to restrain it. Helmut Schmitt, the former German Chancellor, saw this danger many years ago, when he unequivocally stated that, both for its own sake and for the sake of Europe, Germany should not even try to be first among equals. Little did he imagine that in just a few years Germany was to become first among unequals. And it's little relief to think that nowadays Germany is a democracy, if it is a democracy *über alles*.

One should not forget that the therapy of violent imposition forced upon Greece was used in the past against a conquered region of Germany – East Germany – during the reunification process, and not only that, it was applied by the same personage, Wolfgang Schäuble, who was then a minister in Chancellor Helmut Kohl's cabinet. The big difference was that, back then, Schäuble's financial fury had to be politically restrained because only Germans were involved. The Greek people – and from now on, every European – will have to pay dearly for not being German. Unless, of course, Germany is democratically restrained by the European countries. I do not see any good in reacting defensively by way of a return to sovereignty. In fact, sovereignty is already established in Europe, albeit under two guises: the aggressive sovereignty of the strong (spearheaded by Germany) and the defensive sovereignty of the weak (attempted by the Southern countries, now joined by stunned France itself). In the European context, sovereignty or nationalism among unequals is an invitation to war. That is why, no matter how small the odds, it is imperative that the EU be rebuilt on a democratic basis, toward a Europe of the peoples that is no

longer ruled by drab, non-elected bureaucrats at the service of mighty customers, while democratically elected but politically disarmed representatives look distractedly away.

These solutions are not likely to solve everything, because the German problem has other dimensions as well, namely with regard to culture and identity, where things tend to become particularly virulent when it comes to Southern European countries. In a letter to his friend Franz Overbeck, dated 14 September 1884, Friedrich Nietzsche berated the “mediocre German bourgeois spirit” for being so prejudiced against the countries of Southern Europe: “when faced with whatever comes from the Southern countries, it strikes a posture somewhere between suspicion and irritation and all it sees is frivolity ... It is the same kind of resistance with which it reacts to my philosophy ... What it hates about me is the clear skies.” And he concluded: “this Italian fellow said to me the other day, «compared to what we call sky, the German sky is a joke.»” To put it in today’s terms, Southern Europeans must convince Germans that the clear skies of the South are more than beaches and tourism. They are also the aspiration that diversity be respected as a prerequisite to peace, dignity, and democratic coexistence.