



FROM BONN TO BERLIN

GERMAN POLITICS
IN TRANSITION

LEWIS J. EDINGER &
BRIGITTE L. NACOS

From Bonn to Berlin

German Politics in Transition

Lewis J. Edinger and Brigitte L. Nacos



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Introduction: At the Crossroads

In the summer of 1995, when the conceptual artist Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude covered the 101-year-old German *Reichstag* (Parliament) in Berlin with more than a million square feet of silver-colored fabric and transformed the building temporarily into a colossal gift-box, they presented Germans with one of the most spectacular outdoor projects of this sort and with a powerful metaphor for the country's transition from West Germany's Bonn Republic to reunited Germany's Berlin Republic. Moreover, as one American observer put it, "If the architecture of the Reichstag represents a kind of Prussian hardness—Germany as it was—the wrapped version can almost be seen as an ideal symbol of the new Germany struggling to emerge from unification."¹

Two years earlier, when the federal diet (*Bundestag*) had debated and narrowly approved the wrapping, many deputies had opposed the project as trivialization of the country's perhaps most famous landmark. One deputy had warned that the wrapping would not bring people together but polarize them. But contrary to such strong reservations millions of joyful East and West Germans viewed and perhaps understood the symbolic meaning of the wrapped landmark. The veiling and unveiling of the monumental building signified the country's enduring and changing features: Just as the Reichstag's foundations, bearing walls, and facades reemerged unchanged and strong when Christo's gift-wrapping was taken off, the Bonn Republic's democratic roots, solid structures,

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and institutional framework remained the underpinnings of a slowly emerging Berlin Republic. Just as the gutted interior of the Reichstag required significant remodeling to house the Bundestag, Germany's political, economic, and social arrangements needed meaningful modifications to deal with the realities of the 1990s and the dawn of the new century. And just as the surroundings of the Reichstag looked dramatically different since the fall of communism, the external environment of the Federal Republic also had changed since the end of the Cold War in both political and economic terms.²

Several years after German reunification, Columbia University Press asked Lewis Edinger to consider another revision of his widely used textbook *German Politics*. Recognizing that the dynamic internal and external changes after the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of communism raised new and different questions about the political process in the Federal Republic, Edinger concluded that a revision would not do. The idea of a new book—this book—and of our collaboration took shape during our conversations in the political science department at Columbia University. Although working in different fields (American-raised Lewis Edinger in comparative politics with special expertise in Western Europe and especially Germany; German-raised Brigitte Nacos in American government and politics), we shared a profound interest in Germany—and still do.

Most mass-media organizations in the United States tend to cover the Federal Republic of Germany sparsely unless major events unfold. Consequently, most Americans see, read, and hear very little about German politics and policies. For this reason we decided against writing a textbook on German politics and collaborated instead on a book that gives the interested general public an opportunity to learn about politics in the Federal Republic at a time when the reunified country faces formidable challenges within its own borders and in the European and global setting. With a broad audience in mind we tried to refrain from political science jargon—probably without fully succeeding.

We do not claim to address all pertinent political problems and issues in present-day Germany; instead, we have concentrated on what we believe are some of the most important and interesting factors and issue areas. Our work is *primarily* about German politics on the road to the twenty-first century with special attention to the patterns of continuity and change in the country's governmental process. Whether the German democracy can adapt to and cope with the rapidly changing domestic

and international conditions and whether the country remains a model of stability in the heart of Europe, is of vital interest to Germans, Europeans and Americans. Our *secondary* theme concerns comparisons between German and American political traditions, structures, institutions, actors, processes, and issues—but only to the extent that they illuminate the similarities and differences and help American readers to understand German politics better and perhaps their own as well.

To be sure, writing about German politics after the end of the Cold War is like aiming at a moving target. More than half a century after the fall of Hitler's Third Reich the political patterns established in the first four decades of the Federal Republic are undergoing endurance tests under dynamic new conditions. Politics and policies are in flux, and it is now far more difficult than in the preceding decades to pinpoint continuing and changing trends. But the challenges prompted by the reunification of the two Germanys, the move toward increased economic and political integration in Europe, and the intensifying global interdependence of the economic and monetary markets are precisely the reasons why we have examined German politics at this critical time.

In choosing *From Bonn to Berlin: German Politics in Transition* as the title of our book, we hope to convey the fluid mode of German politics in the 1990s and conceivably in the early part of the twenty-first century. Some observers have argued that contemporary Germany is at a crossroads and expressed doubts about the future direction of German politics; others have proclaimed the collapse of the socioeconomic "German model" altogether. Although we, too, were somewhat pessimistic at the outset, we have become more optimistic as we researched and wrote this book.

We have arranged our work in two distinct parts. In Part I, "Continuity and Change" (Chapters 1 through 3), we describe the basic attributes of German politics and the degree of constancy and change found in the country's political institutions, actors, values, and realities. In Part II, "Problems, Issues, and Prospects" (Chapters 4 through 7), we look at specific problems and issues in several policy areas and examine whether the political realm will be able to cope with the significant challenges it is facing now and will face for some time to come.

After reviewing several German motion pictures in 1994, film critic John Rockwell concluded that the overwhelming majority of Germans "are eerily like centrist-left-liberal Americans of the middle and upper-middle classes. . . . They dress like us, they talk like us, they behave like

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us, much of the time. . . . But they aren't us, and the differences lurk just beneath the familiar surface."³ In many respects, German politics and the major political issues, too, resemble contemporary American politics and issues a great deal. But there are distinct differences as well. In Chapter 1 we address features that are peculiar to the Federal Republic, namely the consequences of reunification, the legacy of the Nazi past, and the country's enhanced role in Europe. In one way or the other these factors touch upon contemporary German politics.

For the reader not familiar with politics in the Federal Republic, in chapter 2 we explain the basic governmental design of Germany's representative democracy, the electoral system, and the central role of political parties. The institutional order that existed in West Germany long before the two Germanies reunified in 1990 has remained the framework for government and politics. But apart from this continuity in the basic political arrangements, this chapter also addresses some of the notable changes in the party system and within the major parties.

The founders of the Federal Republic designed a representative democracy where voting was the only feature for mass participation. But declining party loyalty and diminishing trust in what Germans call the political class has put pressure on the major parties to reconnect with their members as well as with citizens and voters in general and enact reforms that foster greater participation. Chapter 3 traces these still fairly modest shifts and the recent changes in the German mass media that favor a move toward more direct mass participation in the electoral and governmental process.

German reunification has accelerated the pace of societal changes that had already been underway in West Germany at the time reunification took place. Thus, Germans have become less religious, narrowed the gender gap in society and politics, and encountered the aging of their society as people live longer and birthrates decline. As Chapter 4 explains, Germans and German politics have far greater difficulties coming to terms with the fact that immigrants replenish their declining population and strengthen their economy and welfare state than with the changing role of women and churches in society and in politics.

Since the early 1990s, Germany's social market economy with its "capitalism with a human face" (Chapter 5) and its expansive social safety net (Chapter 6) has been under more pressure than ever to reform in ways that curtail some of the costs in order to safeguard the system itself. Because cooperation, not conflict, has guided the politics of eco-

conomic and social policymaking in the Federal Republic before, during, and after the “economic miracle” era, we explore the German model itself and whether it will be able to adapt to the more recent internal and external challenges without risking social peace and political stability.

Foreign policy has not been high on the agenda of German politics in the 1990s, as we explain in Chapter 7. Just as public officials and experts in the United States have been preoccupied with domestic politics and policies in the years following the collapse of communism, German leaders also have shown so little interest in rethinking the country’s role and importance in the post-Cold War era that some critical observers have asked whether the Federal Republic is at all interested in foreign policy in the 1990s.

We conclude with a summary of our findings and take a look at the road ahead in order to speculate about Germany’s and the emerging Berlin Republic’s politics and policies in the next century.

PART ONE

Continuity and Change

1

German Questions *Old and New*

On June 20, 1991 the parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Bundestag, resolved to move the capital from Bonn, its “temporary” location for some 40 years, to Berlin, the traditional capital until the Cold War had split the country into two parts. The day-long, passionate debate that preceded a very close decision was in the judgment of observers the greatest in the Federal Diet’s history. With the advocates of Berlin and the champions of Bonn divided across party lines, the deputies were not shackled by the usual party discipline but free to express and vote their own convictions. The outcome of the late-night ballot was uncertain until the Bundestag’s President, Rita Süßmuth, announced the result: 338 deputies voted for Berlin and 320 for Bonn.

In the end, an emotional speech by Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who had been instrumental in negotiating the unification treaty between the governments of East and West Germany in 1990, was credited with swinging the decisive votes for Berlin. For four decades Germany’s largest city, divided like the rest of the country and completely surrounded by the territory of the East German socialist state, had been the symbol of Germany’s partition and the quest for unity—even in the face of the mutually recognized political reality of the two sovereign German states. In 1949, when the Bundestag made Bonn the capital of the new Federal Republic, the deputies tied this decision to an explicit promise to move the leading institutions of government to Berlin as soon

as free elections could be held in what was at the time the Soviet zone of occupation. Not to live up to this promise now, the supporters of Berlin argued, would deepen the sense of abandonment, distance, and alienation that many East Germans felt in the wake of unification. "What is at stake today is not Bonn or Berlin but the future of us all," Interior Minister Schäuble said in his plea. Others argued that the move from Bonn to Berlin would help to demolish the psychological wall between East and West Germans and cement unification. "For me," Chancellor Helmut Kohl said, "Berlin has always meant the opportunity to overcome division."

But the supporters of Bonn rejected a change of venue to Berlin just as passionately by summoning the light and the dark chapters of the country's past. For them Bonn stood for the years preceding reunification, when the small town on the Rhine River was the center of the German politics that had built a sound democratic society and steered the ship of state away from the troubled past during which Berlin had been the capital city.

Willy Brandt, the former West German Chancellor who had also been the Mayor of Berlin, chided speakers who alluded to Berlin as a symbol of German aggression, arrogance, and failure; he took exception to what he labeled "nonsense" aimed at blemishing the city as the stronghold of criminal Nazism and fanatic nationalism. But the young and middle-aged deputies did not share their elders' attachment to Berlin; they wanted to keep the capital of united Germany in Bonn, the birthplace of Germany's stable democracy and the city most closely linked to the longest peaceful chapter in Germany's history.

These arguments aroused also anxieties among Germany's neighbors for whom Berlin had symbolized Prussian and Nazi expansionism. During the most chilling periods of the Cold War Germany's Western allies had come to view and defend West Berlin as the bulwark of freedom and democracy, but when the communist bloc disintegrated and the two Germanys reunited, old fears reemerged in Europe. One French observer pointed out that

the emergence of the German colossus is bringing under our noses what we did not like to see. Over and above that, it [German reunification] moves the center of gravity away from us—from the Rhine towards Prussia and from Bonn to Berlin. From the top of the Reichstag that has been regained, the German eagle nests equidistant from Strasbourg and from Warsaw. Germany, a big nation, is again becom-

ing a great nation: all it lacks is the military arm. From the height of its power, its industrialists and merchants are looking far beyond the West, at the wide world. And France looks at Germany. It is the season of suspicion—thoroughly foreseeable after all.¹

Thus, the Bonn-or-Berlin issue also dramatized questions as to the future role of a unified German state in the new European and world order.

The political significance of the decision was not lost on either the legislators, who made the close call, or on domestic and foreign observers, who interpreted it. For Germans and their neighbors the vote in favor of Berlin—more so than the legal unification of the two Germanys on October 3, 1990—signaled the end of the post-World War II period and the dawn of a newly united, sovereign Germany.

The openness, setting, and rules of the Berlin-or-Bonn debate confirmed the widely held view that politics in the Federal Republic resembled in many respects politics in any other major democracy—including the United States. But this particular issue highlighted also the uniquely German factors that affect politics in the Federal Republic at the threshold of the twenty-first century. After all, the issue and the debate were caused, shaped, and fueled by three unique features of German politics: (1) the consequences of German unification after more than four decades of division, (2) the lingering legacy of the country's Nazi past, and (3) Germany's geographic uniqueness as a country in the middle of Europe (*Land der Mitte*) that was restored after the collapse of the Soviet-dominated Eastern European bloc.

The Consequences of Division and Unification

When joyous East and West Germans embraced and danced on top of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, nobody was more surprised than political leaders and average citizens in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Just a year before the Iron Curtain crumbled in Berlin and along the border between the two Germanys, Chancellor Kohl had publicly stated that he did not expect a united Germany during his lifetime. More than 70 percent of the West German public were of the same opinion while only 9 percent believed that they would live to witness the reunification of their divided land. Neither the West German nor the American nor any other Western intelligence services anticipated the events in the Communist German Democratic Republic (GDR).