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How Putin's Invasion of Ukraine Upended Germany

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Last October, I sat in the office of Klaus Emmerich—the chief union representative at the Garzweiler brown-coal mine, in western Germany—as he shared his misgivings about the country's celebrated plan to

stop burning coal. [Germany's buildup of renewable energy was lagging](#), and, given that coal accounts for more than a quarter of its total electricity supply, that meant it would have to rely on another energy source for the time being: natural gas, which came mostly from Russia. “We’re giving ourselves over to the Russians,” Emmerich told me. “I have a bad feeling about it.”

Five months later, Emmerich's premonitions have been borne out, powerfully. [President Vladimir Putin's](#) invasion of Ukraine has unleashed civilian and military carnage, ravaged cities, and sent some two million people fleeing the country. As its

effects have rippled across Europe and the world, one has gone underexamined: the invasion has upended the political and economic policies of Germany, where the government has reconsidered its long-planned energy transition, undone a congenial political stance toward Russia that lasted for half a century, and reversed a policy of military minimalism that dates to the end of the Second World War. In many ways, Germany has rethought its place in the world—all in two weeks.

At the heart of the shift is Germany's dependence on Russian fossil fuels—which, until recently, was not seen as

problematic by German leaders. Quite the opposite: it was part of a deliberate, decades-long effort by Germany to maintain comity with the huge, nuclear-armed neighbor against whom it fought in two bloody twentieth-century wars. Germany *chose* its dependence on Russia because it saw the economic links created by fuel imports—physical links, in the form of pipelines through Eastern Europe and under the Baltic Sea—as integral to keeping peace and integrating Russia into the rest of Europe.

On February 22nd, Germany's new Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, announced a curtailment of that dependence on

Russian energy. The country was halting Nord Stream 2, a new gas pipeline from Russia that would be capable of providing Europe with fifty-five billion cubic metres of gas per year, at a time when the rest of the Continent's gas production is declining. Not only would this leave Germany without a crucial source for its energy supply; it was an admission that the strategy of *Ostpolitik*—accommodation with Russia, which Scholz's center-left Social Democratic Party had embraced, at least in spirit, for more than fifty years—was a failure.

On February 27th, Scholz made an even more stunning declaration. After

having already decided to send heavy weaponry to Ukraine, Germany would vastly increase its defense spending—by one estimate, making it the third largest military spender in the world, after the U.S. and China—and shift its entire posture toward military engagement. “President Putin created a new reality with his invasion of Ukraine,” Scholz said. “This new reality requires a clear response. We have given it.”

The following day, Finance Minister Christian Lindner told the broadcaster ARD that Germany would now “get one of the most capable, most powerful armies in Europe, one of the best-

equipped armies in Europe in the course of this decade.” More than seventy-five years after the Nazis were vanquished, Germany would allow itself to think and act as a regional power again, complete with pride in its military capability. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, a senior member of the historically pacifist-inclined Green Party, said, “If our world is different, then our politics must also be different.” It is hard to overstate the magnitude of this shift, which has left many Germans in shock. “I don’t think I’ve seen anything like it in my political life,” Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff, the vice-president of the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund think tank and

a former senior government adviser, told me. “It’s staggering.”

Ostpolitik, or “eastern policy,” dates back to Willy Brandt, who led the Social Democrats (known by their German acronym, the S.P.D.) into power in West Germany in 1969. His embrace of détente and diplomatic outreach to East Germany and the Soviet Union was born of a combination of pragmatism in the face of a nuclear-armed threat, guilt over the Nazis’ unfathomable destruction on the Eastern Front, and a desire to show at least some independence from the country’s chief ally and protector, the United States.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unravelling of the Soviet Union, the policy was widely judged a rousing success, credited by many Germans with having helped bring about the end of the Cold War. “Germans thought that, because the Wall came down peacefully, that *Ostpolitik* was right,” Kristine Berzina, also with the German Marshall Fund, told me. “Their lived experience was that those relations led to the right outcome, and that meant that making sure that the gas keeps flowing was paramount not only for the German economy but that it was the right strategic decision.” To Berzina and others, though, this was an inaccurate and fateful misremembering

of *Ostpolitik* and an overstatement of its role in the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The policy depended both on diplomacy and military strength, according to Jan Behrends, a loyal S.P.D. member who has served on the Party's historical commission. In Behrends's view, Brandt was no "hippie peacenik"; he was a Cold Warrior who had, in the late nineteen-forties, lived through the Soviet blockade of Berlin. In 1970, when Brandt paid his first state visit to Moscow, West Germany was spending more than three per cent of its G.D.P. on the military and had half a million people under arms. "They took him seriously because Brezhnev

looked at him and saw that he was head of the most important fighting force in Western Europe,” Behrends, a historian at the European University Viadrina, in eastern Germany, said.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Germany kept up with *Ostpolitik*, and the country's military spending slipped below 1.5 per cent of G.D.P., even as signs mounted that Russia was on an alarming trajectory under Putin, who, in the nineteen-nineties, levelled Grozny, in Chechnya, and presided over a regime that saw disturbing numbers of dissidents persecuted and journalists murdered. Germany further expanded its energy ties with Russia. Angela

Merkel, whose center-right Christian Democrats won the 2005 election and led a coalition government with the S.P.D., agreed to carry on with the construction of the first Nord Stream. The S.P.D. Chancellor she unseated, Gerhard Schröder, became the [chairman of the subsidiary overseeing construction of the pipeline](#), in which Russia's Gazprom held a fifty-one-percent stake.

As Chancellor, Merkel continued to protect the country's investment in Russian energy even as more ominous signs emerged: Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference decrying the expansion of *NATO*,

Russia's bombardment of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea and fuelling of the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014, the murder of the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in Moscow. (One disturbing episode even occurred inside Germany. In 2019, a Georgian citizen was killed by a bike-riding assassin, alleged to be a [former colonel in the Russian intelligence service](#), in broad daylight at a Berlin park.)

Yet Germany's dependence on Russian fossil fuels only increased. After the [Fukushima disaster](#), in 2011, Merkel committed to closing all of Germany's nuclear plants in a little

more than a decade. At the time, nuclear energy was providing nearly a quarter of the country's electricity.

“When we closed down nuclear, they must have drunk champagne in the Kremlin,” Behrends said. “That’s when we gave up our energy sovereignty.”

Behrends doesn't just blame Merkel. In 2014 and 2015, the U.S. essentially deputized the German Chancellor to handle its Russia policy during negotiations in Minsk to end the fighting in the Donbas region. (Merkel grew up in East Germany, where Putin worked for the K.G.B., and speaks Russian. Among journalists, she was known as the “Putin whisperer.”) “Why

did they outsource their Russia policy to Merkel and trust her so much?"

Behrends asked. "If the U.S. had sat at the table, they would have carried much more weight, but they weren't there."

In hindsight, Germany's complacency toward Putin's abuses and consolidation of power looks feckless. But there was little public appetite in Germany for confrontation. Behrends described Merkel's soft stance as a form of "silent populism." She sensed that the Germans, basking in peace and prosperity, would not support upending the status quo. "She was popular with Germans because she

didn't disturb their need for *Bequemlichkeit*, their comfort zone," he told me.

Looming above all, of course, was the boundless shame of the Third Reich, which left many Germans intent on moral repentance. Within the country, there has long been a divide over what this repentance should entail, roughly aligned in two camps: those who believe that Germany should never permit itself to return to totalitarianism ("never again dictatorship" or "never again Auschwitz"), and those who believe that Germany should never engage in any war, full stop. With a few exceptions, such as Germany's limited

participation in *NATO's* operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, the “never again war” camp has held sway.

Germany was further restrained by a regional political dynamic that came into play post-reunification. Former East Germans, who had endured the Red Army's depredations at the end of the Second World War in ways that the rest of the country had not, were deeply wary of antagonizing Russia. Some also felt betrayed by western Germany for having abandoned its promises of vast economic aid in the east following reunification, which created some sympathy for Putin's claims to having been cheated by the

West.

Olaf Scholz is an unlikely figure to lead Germany's abrupt break with its postwar maxim "*Es gibt keine militärische Lösung*" ("There is no military solution"). This past summer, when I saw him speak at a campaign rally in Berlin, he struck me as a politician in the mold of an old-fashioned Midwestern Democrat, like [Ohio's Senator Sherrod Brown](#): progressive but measured, comfortable in his own skin, self-effacing, motivated above all by domestic concerns. (Like Brown, Scholz spoke often of restoring "respect" to the non-college-educated workers who had been drifting away

from his party.) There was barely any mention of Russia, or foreign policy in general, during the campaign's televised debates.

Scholz assumed the Chancellorship in December, and his allies sent more weapons to Ukraine. Germany was ridiculed for promising only helmets. As the U.S. prepared sanctions against Russia, Germany equivocated on the fate of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

On February 15th, Scholz visited Putin at the Kremlin. The experience of listening "to Putin unplugged" for hours likely helped transform Scholz, Kleine-Brockhoff said. "He got a good education from Vladimir the Great." A

week later, Putin recognized the two separatist regions in Ukraine, and Russian forces invaded. Behrends's S.P.D. sources have told him that Scholz discussed the substance of his landmark speech on military spending with few beyond his closest advisers, which made for good theatre in the Bundestag: members who might have decried such a major shift were caught unawares, and were carried along from applauding Scholz's generalities about supporting Ukraine to applauding rhetoric whose import registered too late.

After the speech, applause poured in from Germany's allies, too. A little more

than three decades after Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand warned against German reunification, the leaders of the Western alliance were a generation removed from living through the Second World War and German military aggression. Their countries, the U.S., and others were desperate for Western Europe's largest country to step up. "It represents the moment when Germany became comfortable—and found it inevitable—to become a military power, and when others around Germany became comfortable with that decision," Kleine-Brockhoff said. "That was the momentous thing. You could hear the cheers from Paris and Warsaw. You

could see the smiles from London and Washington.”

Scholz's military shift calls for an immediate expenditure of a hundred billion euros on the armed forces and, in years ahead, a return to spending more than two per cent of G.D.P. on defense. Reaching the two-per-cent threshold would meet Germany's commitment to *NATO*. (Putin's actions might achieve what former President Donald Trump's browbeating never did.)

Notably unresolved, though, is how Germany plans to survive with much less of the Russian fossil fuels it has sought all these years. According to

[Bloomberg](#), the country now relies on Russia for two-thirds of its natural gas, half its coal, and nearly a third of its oil. Extending reliance on nuclear energy won't be an easy stopgap. Last fall, energy experts told me that prolonging the life of Germany's three remaining nuclear plants wasn't feasible; once the process of closing starts, it's difficult to reverse. On Tuesday, Economy Minister Robert Habeck, a member of the Green Party, [ruled out](#) a nuclear extension.

The country could delay its exit from coal, but that would imperil its goals for sharply reducing carbon emissions. And electricity production is far from

the only concern: natural gas is used to make fertilizer and, crucially, for home heating in the winter. So assured had Germany been in its Russian pipelines that it is only now building two terminals on the North Sea to receive liquefied natural gas from other countries. The terminals will take at least two years to complete, and the gas itself will likely be far costlier. (The [European Union](#), as a whole, announced plans this week to reduce annual imports of Russian natural gas by two-thirds.)