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Germany Between East and West

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Germany Between East and West

Klaus Blech (bio)

This essay addresses the problems of today's Germany—the reunited Germany in a new European and global environment, a world dramatically changed since 1989. Does the title “Germany between East and West”

imply that the phrase “between East and West” correctly portrays contemporary Germany’s international situation and internal character? Is the word “between” the key to the decisive problems the Germans have with themselves and others have with the Germans?

As always, matters are more difficult. Reality is obviously too complex to be captured by one beguiling theory. As important as the East-West aspect is, it is not the single dominant factor of Germany’s existence today. Its undoubted significance derives from its interaction with other determining balances, most of which characterize all modern societies—between free market and social state, or between traditional, modern, and postmodern culture, or between very diversely shaped generations. Germany’s evolution in all these matters certainly cannot be explained by its geographical location at the center of Europe.

However, throughout modern history the East-West aspect has quite obviously played a prominent role in forming Germany’s character as a state and society. With the reunification of Germany, and indeed of Europe as a whole, the East-West factor again comes to the fore. A reunited Europe needs to reflect on its identity; Germany in particular, whose position is the most altered, is inevitably, if reluctantly, required to do so. **[End Page 23]**

Given the importance of the East-West dimension for Germany, its actual influence is often subtle and elusive—perhaps better displayed through metaphor and personal anecdote than through precise academic analysis. Much of what I have to say is from my own personal experience and intuition. Yet an argument develops through these observations. I will attempt to outline it simply and a bit crudely at the outset.

There are five distinct but closely related points. The first has to do with the meaning of “between” East and West. There are two distinct possibilities for understanding this term in our present context: The first is described in German by *Zwischenlage*, or central location in between. The second is described by *Zwischenstellung*, or position in between. I will

develop this distinction and analyze its significance.

My second point is that Germany now faces a “double between”—a cleavage between its own domestic East and West, and a tension in determining its European priorities—between old allies in Western Europe and America, on the one hand, and old/new neighbors in central Europe, including Russia herself, on the other. In feeling this tension between the old West and the new East, Germany is hardly unique. Contemporary East-West relations pose a major problem for the entire West, not only Germany. But for Germany, this external tension has a unique internal manifestation; hence, Germany’s “double between.”

My third observation is closely related. Germany’s double between is reflected in a very significant generational rift among Germans. The views of my generation and the postwar generation vary considerably on inner-German or broader European East-West issues.

My fourth point is that the East-West issue in Germany is particularly difficult because it is bound up with troubling new questions of national identity, and these re-opened questions of identity threaten the accommodation that postwar Germans, particularly of the younger generation, have made with the unpleasant parts of their past.

Finally, Germany’s difficulties in coming to terms with the East-West issue—in both its national and European manifestation—help greatly to explain the reunited Federal Republic’s “operative timidity” in defining itself as a “normal” great power in a new/old Europe. **[End Page 24]**

Talking about Germany between East and West can mean quite different things: “between” can refer either to Germany’s central geographical location in Europe, or to a conscious act—the free or constrained opting for a position between at least two others. While the geographical situation is an invariable fact, the human-made political position is subject to change. Geography, moreover, does not inevitably determine politics. If such a congruence has existed in the past, one has...



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