

# Proud to be German?

Two articles about being proud to be German, published in *FAZ* in March and April 2001

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It all began with a comment by CDU General Secretary Laurenz Meyer: "I'm proud to be German." This was enough for Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin to compare him to a "skinhead." That in turn has ignited a debate among politicians, historians and commentators as to the limits and acceptability of patriotism in a country with a troubled past.

## Germans Happy to Say They Like Being Proud

*By Manfred Köhler*

FRANKFURT. Can anybody be proud of a country where politicians think the most important question is whether you can be proud of the country? Of course.

How else would we have found out that entertainer Roberto Blanco thinks Germans can be justifiably proud of their country's achievements? And that singer Udo Lindenberg says the word "proud" should only cross German lips again once the new Nazis have been stopped? Song writer Ralph Siegel, sensitive soul that he is, did not say "I am proud to be a German," but only that "I am happy that I was born in Germany."

Who ever would have thought it? Over the last few days everyone has had something to say. Entertainer Karl Moik (is proud to be an Austrian), Eurovision song contest singer Michelle (proud to have been asked) and Johannes Rau (proud to be president).

Germans simply like being proud. It does not matter about what. Let us take a brief look at some news items from the last few days. According to the mayor, the residents of Mainflingen in the district of Offenbach are proud that their town is home to the transmitter that switches over all the radio clocks in Germany to daylight-saving time. Doris Schröder-Köpf, the wife of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, was proud of her homegrown radishes even as a child, she told "Living Gardens" magazine.

All Weimar is proud that Goethe's house is now finally illuminated at night; after all Friedrich Hebbel said this workplace was the only battlefield the Germans could be proud of, according to Bernd Kauffmann, president of the Weimar Classics Foundation.

The Germans are always especially proud of their culture. According to the Allensbach Institute of Public Opinion Research, 80 percent of western Germans and 90 percent of eastern Germans are proud of Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven and Bach (the institute was polite enough not to ask if they also knew these gentlemen's first names as well).

Almost as many people are just as proud of medieval cities and cathedrals, and German science and research. Four-fifths of those surveyed were even proud of German athletes, although admittedly the poll was carried out in autumn 1999 before the European Soccer Championship. The Germans are also proud of postwar reconstruction (almost 90 percent), the beautiful landscape (a good 80 percent) and German cars (just under 80 percent).

The strange thing is that the Germans are far less proud of Germany as a whole. Asked "are you proud to be German?" only 53 percent of western Germans and 56 percent of eastern Germans said they were "very" or at least "quite" proud.

Of course, there are plenty of jibes from beyond the German borders. "One might think the Berlin republic, happily ensconced in its newly found capital, has no more burning issues to discuss," mocked the French daily *Liberation*. "The German political classes are once more laboring under their fractured relationship to their own nation," the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote.

All the same, the high esteem in which the Germans hold themselves contrasts with the sobering fact that the 5.92 billion foreigners are certainly not struck dumb with admiration when any of them are found worthy to touch German soil.

The much traveled authors of the Australian "Lonely Planet" travel guides, for example, acknowledge Goethe's achievements in the culture chapter of their guide to Germany, but remind readers a few lines later that they should forget calorie counting and cholesterol levels because this is meat and potato country.

That hurts. But it gets worse. The autobahns, they write, can be both wonderful and a nightmare — especially when Porsches and BMWs appear in "monster-size" in your rear mirror.

In her book, "These Strange German Ways," written for foreigners coming to Germany, American writer Susan Stern even mocks the German enthusiasm for time planning, telling readers that gardening and washing the car are activities reserved for Saturdays, walking in the forest is reserved for Sundays and humor is reserved for Shrove Tuesday.

She smiles at the German custom of always keeping the windows open, especially bedroom windows, even in winter. She describes the Germans as people who are always annoyed about something, who look fearfully into the future and who are devoted adherents of *Gemütlichkeit*, a concept of comfort and coziness that has no English equivalent. *Gemütliche* rooms, Ms. Stern tells her foreign readers, have a lot of rustic-looking wood, woolen blankets, colorful wallpaper, ornaments and soft armchairs.

But because German *Gemütlichkeit* is tidy and geometrical, cushions stand in a row on the couch and even the houseplants stand at attention, which is why visitors of other nationalities often do not notice just how comfortable German apartments are. Ms. Stern has observed that the Germans always need a lot of room and always keep their doors closed to lay down the boundary that separates their own space from that of others. "Entry by invitation only."

Unfortunately, Ms. Stern does not say that the nicest thing about the Germans are their narcissistic debates on subjects such as defining culture, 1968 and national pride. Here they are inimitable. And everybody can make a contribution. Even if he is not proud.  
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## **Cutting Through the Mental Fire Wall**

*By Thomas Schmid*

FRANKFURT. Thinking of Germany in the night gives poor Germans a terrible fright. But very few of them still take this bit of Heinrich Heine's poetry literally or seriously.

Indeed, since the coalition of the Social Democratic Party and Alliance 90/The Greens came to power in Berlin, a budding left-wing pride in their country has become apparent. Nevertheless, a distrust of the country and people is so deep-rooted among the governing that it has almost become second nature to stifle any feelings of affection. Many of those who have learned from German history would quite simply prefer to disclaim their heritage. Declaring oneself a stranger in one's own country is widely considered a sign of enlightenment.

There are good reasons for this estrangement. The breach with civilization that Germans orchestrated more than half a century ago has robbed people's attachment to their own country of all its naturalness. The body politic and its history could no longer routinely act as the humus from which love of the fatherland grows. For post-1945, there was no cause to cultivate German history with pride.

Nonetheless, the political language of the 1940s and '50s continued to draw on the concept of the German nation. But then, as prosperity set in and the matter-of-fact U.S.-British mind-set was no longer considered «foreign to German nature» and was even adopted with some enthusiasm, Germans broke with this tradition. The concept of the fatherland went out of fashion and was mothballed, if not entirely discredited. In mainstream society, it became almost worthless. Instead, the Germans saw themselves as consumers or cosmopolitans.

There was something escapist about this phenomenon, as author Martin Walser recognized early on. The nimble leap into Europeanism sloughed off the burden of Germany's troublesome history. The process had precious little to do with «digesting» or «coming to terms» with the past.

The chant «Never again Germany!» at demonstrations in the weeks before German unification in 1990 took to extremes an attitude shared by many outside the far-left and inside the middle class. The Auschwitz death camp had become an inescapable parameter of German history, a negative yet defining founding myth of the Federal Republic of Germany. «Never again» became a mental fire wall to protect Germans from themselves and their history.

The current political and public dispute over whether it is acceptable to be «proud» to be German is absurd. People here want to like the country they live in; they are fond of it. Helmut Kohl's talk of patriotism in the 1980s led many to look upon him suspiciously, yet he is not far from the present foreign minister, who represents his country in a very German way and sees himself as one in a proud line. In the argument over whether it is wrong to feel proud of being German, the opposing sides accuse each other of Germanomania or a lack of patriotism, depending on their position. Foolish as that may be, the inability to find a common language and perception does mask a very real problem.

The sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf once said: «Patriotism is the prerequisite for cosmopolitanism. It is true at least that people have to belong somewhere before they open up to broader horizons.» How nice that would be — a smooth, harmonious transition from family and home to society, the national and global community. But that is not how things are.

Home can be the port from which people embark onto the global sea. But they may not necessarily do so; it is not inborn. People are not universalistic. People love what is near, not far, the familiar rather than the unfamiliar. This applies equally to conservatives who feel disturbed by the presence of foreigners and to progressives who can hardly stand conservative sentiments. People cannot choose where they come from, yet it is precisely this origin that molds them possibly more clearly and permanently than anything else.

Attempts to view being German as a given, as something natural or unquestionable, are not very convincing, however. Although notions of society and the nation carry tradition, they are also fabricated and desirable. The point of departure for love of the fatherland always lies in pre-rational feelings and inclinations.

Seen this way, patriotism could be an attempt to proceed from the pre-rational nature of origin and tame it by social endeavor so as to produce a body politic in which one can live peacefully and of which one can be proud even from a universalist point of view. Writing 240 years ago at the age of 23, philosopher Thomas Abbt said of patriotism: «If by accident of birth or of my own free will I am united with a state to whose healing laws I submit, laws that do not deprive me of any more of my freedom than is necessary for the good of the state as a whole, then I will call that state my fatherland.»

So is it constitutional patriotism we are after? Not according to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for when he or his supporters use this expression, they say the second half of it in an embarrassed whisper — or omit it. Dolf Sternberger, who coined the term long before Mr. Habermas used it,

stood for both. He saw patriotism as part of the Roman republic's tradition and believed it to be far superior to the nationalism that it preceded because it was the feeling that united the citizens of a free society, and because, unlike pure republicanism, it could tolerate and indeed required «an element of natural attachment to the homeland.»

What would be true even without Auschwitz is even more true after Auschwitz: Love of the fatherland is both natural and fabricated. It may be expressed just as much in love of the constitution or the federal order as in love of the works council law or Germany's foreign aid agency. It enables individuals to recognize and integrate even those parts of the body politic that are not their own. Without relinquishing any of his love of debate or political sympathy, the true patriot can accept the contradictory reality of his country.

Even in the future, people will continue to live not in networks but in real places. They will continue to have places they call home, even if their attachment to them is weaker than it might have been in the past. And these many places people call home will need the collectivity that gives rise to feelings of patriotism all the more, since globalism brings not only benefits. In a world that is changing rapidly and consuming cultural traditions and certainties, patriotism is a frail plant that needs to be well tended, if need be with a moderate dose of pathos.

The adherents to the slogan «never again» are actually those who most need patriotism — as Sternberger meant it. Only a sense of collectivity, which may contain the traditions spawned by *ius sanguinis* (citizenship determined by parentage) as well as society's constitutional order, will be able to guarantee that a German citizen of Turkish, Moroccan or Danish origin will, in a generation, still view Auschwitz as something that concerns him.

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