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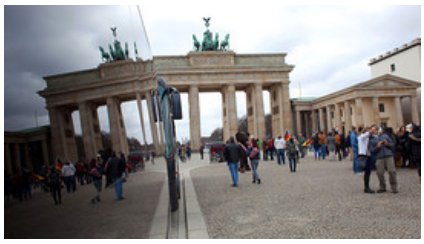
German fear of history jeopardises Europe's future

By Mark Mazower

The onus is on Berlin to show it can accept the responsibilities of leadership, writes Mark Mazower



With Wolfgang Schäuble, German finance minister, having flown into Athens on Thursday for a morale-boosting visit, it is becoming clearer than ever that Europe has a hegemon problem.

Under President François Hollande, France has been all but missing in action where the EU is concerned. The UK has never counted for less in Europe thanks to the commitment by David Cameron, prime minister, to an eventual referendum on EU membership. Even in good times, Italy and Spain do not carry the same weight as their northern neighbours; right now they are crippled by the crisis.

That leaves Germany. Neither the Germans themselves nor anyone else seem very comfortable with this. Yet Berlin's primacy is a reality that cannot be wished away. The challenge is to figure out how to make it beneficial for everyone.

On the eve of the second world war, an elderly German lawyer wrote what remains the classic work on the subject of hegemony. Heinrich Triepel was interested in reconciling power politics with the notion that sovereign states are all juridically equal. A topic still close to the heart of international lawyers, it came naturally to Triepel's generation, for whom the central question of German politics was Prussia and its relationship to the smaller German statelets. With spectacular timing, *Die Hegemonie* came out in 1938, just as Hitler's troops began their long march through Europe.

The Nazi New Order turned out to be everything that Triepel argued against. All force and no rules, Hitler's vision of Europe rested upon no real sense of ideological or cultural community. A few honorary Aryans aside, non-Germans were clearly second-class subjects. Only at the very end of the war did Berlin wave the banner of anti-communism. (And, unlike Chancellor Angela Merkel, Hitler would never have countenanced spending German taxpayers' money on anyone else.)

Rather than seeing today's Germany as a Fourth Reich, we should view it as shaped by the desire to avoid the Nazi model at all costs. As Mr Schäuble's comments in Athens made clear, Berlin's 21st century conception of hegemony is about forging a set of rules and then insisting that everyone sticks to them. Discretionary power – the essence of Hitler's rule – is thus to be kept to a minimum. A community of norms will bind Europeans together.

This is not the first time that the continent has been led by a power, or a group of powers, that identified their task as imposing norms and rules on others. After the first world war the British and French restored the gold standard; established central banks, including the Bank for International Settlements, to keep monetary policy out of the hands of politicians; encouraged constitutional democracies; and fostered the League of Nations as an international forum. And the Americans did much the same, rather more successfully, after 1945 – helping democracy to recover in western Europe.

But compared with today, what is striking is that none of these hegemons behaved as though they were just like everyone else. The British clearly were not since they had the vast resources of the empire to bankroll their defence of the gold standard.

As for the US, its commitment to building up international institutions after 1945 was consistent with American exceptionalism. It was always for Congress to decide how far the US would need to be bound by the rules it urged for everyone else. This exceptionalism had economic spin-offs too. The US was able to enjoy the benefits of the dollar's role as a global currency.

But Washington also saw the importance of ensuring that dollars continued to be available around the world: Pax Americana depended on its acting as a hegemon in a Keynesian sense, directing funds to where dollars were scarce to enable trade and hence growth to

continue. For decades, Europe was the principal beneficiary of this policy.

But now that the era of American largesse has come to an end, will Berlin continue to be so terrified of the memory of the Third Reich that it abjures discretionary action altogether? That would be fatal. For effective hegemony is not just about rules. Germany's massive balance of payments surpluses are dragging Europe down as surely as France's hoarding of gold did in the 1930s. But can Germany start to see itself as the indispensable pump-primer on a continental scale? Can it accept the responsibilities of leadership?

For cold war America the motive was clear: economic prosperity was seen as a security issue amid fears that communism could feed off the continent's poverty. That worry is gone. But Germany's security and wellbeing are even more bound up than America's was with the stability of European democracy. How it chooses to define its leadership role will show whether it remains haunted by the demons of the past or has become able to assess the needs of the future on their own terms.

The writer is professor of history at Columbia University and author of 'Governing the World'

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