

Extended Commentary: Stunde None

From time to time, grand moments can generate grand excitement which is in fact warranted. For example, I remember watching Barak Obama's inauguration in January 2009; an absolute experience, at least as I saw it. A nation that had struggled so badly with race, yet, where, ironically, diversity on that front might be its crowning feature, finally had a Black American as its chief executive and its primary representative on the international stage. It was the meaning of historic, any number of commentaries noted; regardless of what might happen after, an important barrier will have always been broken.¹ It was also an era in which a new tone might have been necessary after what was then a seven-year slog into the War on Terror—which, though we might not remember, Obama tried to address quickly post-inauguration by speaking to the Muslim world. “So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace,” he intoned at Cairo University.² And, compared with the bombast which would come eight years later, it sounded every bit the picture of reason.

When I initially wrote this in the spring of this year, my sense was that the Ukraine invasion, as prolonged border conflicts sometimes can, was on the edge of fading a touch from view. For a period, even in Europe, it was no longer always the first item in the news (its effects on inflation and gas prices [and things like contested referenda in the breakaway regions] have largely changed that).³ However, for a couple of months (February, March, and April, largely), the event of the war seemed to come off as a massive surprise. Maybe that wasn't so much if one was part of the intelligence community, but vis-à-vis a popular surprise that war returned to Europe after a twenty-year absence. Now, that's not *exactly* the case: fighting had been going on in the Donbas region since 2014, Russia made war with Georgia in 2008, and Russian “peacekeepers” (there are a lot of quotes when it concerns Russian *Realpolitik*) had been in Transnistria since the mid-1990s.⁴ However, the sense was

that, since the Yugoslav Wars (1991-99), the continent hadn't seen a full-blown conflict and that those conflicts, though tragic, were supposed to be blips on the radar screen in the post-Cold War growth of the continent's liberal-internationalism. A full-on invasion of one state by another, even if there are debates about to what degree Russia belongs to Europe, was something that belonged to the past—a time when black and white film captured people in one and a half time and war technologies looked like prototypes of the machinery we use today. Europe's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, argued Russia's invasion gave us the continent's "darkest hours" since the Second World War.⁵ Since the '90s, in any case, and surely inside the space of the twenty-first century.

On February 27th, the conflict's third day, Germany's newly-minted Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, held what at the time I thought was one of the best political speeches of my close to fifty-year lifetime. Germany might be Europe's leading state: its largest economy, political engine, its greatest population, and emerging with relatively few scratches from the waves of Euroscepticism that have plagued neighbors from Denmark to France (we won't even talk Brexit"). Largely, though, Germany had a policy of circumspection regarding the use of military force in the face of what I'd call *Stunde Null* memory—*Stunde Null*, "Zero Hour," being a euphemism for the moment when World War II stopped, and the world, but also the nation specifically, looked up, needing to take stock of the disaster it wrought. The story is known: Germany touched off the world's deadliest conflict, it prosecuted the Holocaust and Shoah, its aggression led to the physical ruin of large parts of Europe, and, via its axis with Japan, it may have occasioned our entry into the age of nuclear weapons and bombs. Since its reunification in 1990, the country's mantra had been no weapons to conflict zones and heavy circumspection vis-à-vis forward positions regarding its security posture. However, "the heavens scream injustice," Scholz said, and nothing could justify the "cold-bloodedness" of what Putin had done. The pain caused by Russia's invasion cut "*sehr nah*," which in German

is akin to “close to the bone.”⁶ Sounding like the title of the historian Arno Mayer’s *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (1988; an assessment of the Holocaust’s history), it was a tipping point. The nation need let go of the past and embrace a new role as a bulwark for democracy. I wouldn’t say it hasn’t. However, I’m not sure it has. In practical terms, Germany has delivered on a number of promises: guaranteeing a serious boost in defense spending, sending weapons to Ukraine, taking the case for a tighter defense policy to its Eurosphere neighbors, and *somehow* trying to wean itself off of Russian oil and gas. However (and I will admit that this article speaks to conditions at the time of its submission, at the start of the summer), that’s been with more hemming and hawing than many had banked on, wherein one wonders if, rather than leaving *Stunde Null*, Germany has slipped into “Stunde None.”⁷ By “Stunde None,” I mean a kind of mealy-mouthed zone in which perhaps the *Stunde Null* concept hasn’t faded as much as we thought and it’s combined with forces like a rough *blasé* towards American “rah-rah for democracyism” and a stripe more sympatico towards Russia among some of its people than perhaps even skeptics had thought. The last point is subtle. However, it ping-pongs off elements of populism, the anti-hegemonic left, and, in the country’s East, echoes of a time when Russia, as the heart of the USSR, had the status of “big brother” and “friend.” Even if it’s a tone problem, that’s a shame because precisely the thoughtfulness demonstrated in German politics over the last three or four decades is what’s needed in a leadership role—and few times has that been better articulated than in the Scholz speech. Of course, no one “wishes” Nazism, the dark sides of communism (or even some of the bizarre conservatisms of the country’s post-War West), had been part of the picture. Still, we might need leadership from a nation that has simultaneously been forced to and willingly has so thoroughly discussed and thought through its past. Germany has *earned* the right to be a primary voice in defense of democracy. The question is if it sees that and what it would take for more of its people to embrace a role that would be of benefit to an international order

based on rules, justice, and general senses of at large human rights.

Now, in many ways, the issues surrounding Germany's security policy extend back not just to the Second but the *First* World War. Historians see the origins of that conflict in a number of forces: competition between empires, the imperatives of capitalism, the nationalisms which dominated Europe through the "long" nineteenth century (1789-1914), the mechanistic character of military planning at the start of the twentieth century and dying empires attempting to reassert significance in a world changing rapidly around them (e.g., Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire). However, Germany was a new state (its unification happened in 1871), that unification happened in no small part under the auspices of Prussian militarism, and it's often viewed as the most aggressive in pursuing its "war aims," as the historian Fritz Fischer once put it.⁸ Germany may have no *Sonderweg*—the idea that there's something in German culture giving it a proclivity towards totalitarian ideals.⁹ Still, the nation had great power aspirations through which, while it wasn't the only culprit behind the Great War, its responsibility is largely thought to have been greater than that of the other powers involved.¹⁰ Certainly, the Allies thought that—one of the facts of the peace being that not only was Germany not included in making it but that Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty (the so-called "War Guilt" clause) laid responsibility for the conflict at Germany's door. No issue may have been more key to Hitler coming to power; broadly unpopular, the size of reparations and the denuding of German territory may have been, above any racial theory, the theme on which the Nazis most harped in the years before Hitler was installed as Chancellor in 1933.¹¹

Within this, Germany's armed forces were a decided theme. It's a generally known story: the German army was reduced to 100,000 (some 14 million served during the First World War), and it was disallowed the use or production of heavy weapons. Fighter planes

were out (World War I had made them a part of any great army), and it had to give up significant territory while its colonies had become League of Nations mandates. The Rhineland—the territory bordering France and the Benelux states—was turned into a demilitarized zone, and only three schools in the country were allowed to train the German officer corps. In part, because no fighting happened on German soil, many Germans had only a vague sense of military defeat. Part of Versailles' point, in the words of Ian Kershaw, was to ensure that Germans "recognized" that.¹² The symbols of great power should be taken from them, and a powerful military was predictably among those.

However, were there a *Sonderweg*, its culmination would surely be Hitler. Synthesizing the anti-Semitism which had plagued Germanic, if not all, European, society, and aping the theatrical nationalism which brought Mussolini to power, commitments to *Lebensraum*, ideas that Germany should restore a neo-mythic greatness, and the concept that "Aryans" stood atop a racial totem pole led to what might be modernity's greatest disaster. Only the most outlandish would say that anyone other than Germany was to blame for an episode that killed 70 million people (the Second World), saw perhaps the worst crime in history (the Holocaust), forced an existential commitment on the part of the Allies to defeat it, and produced war materiel of a potency previously unseen. The German army was at the center of that: running over Europe, occupying nations, assisting the Holocaust, and forcing the world into a six-year vortex whose dimensions were vast. The end of that *Totentanz* was "Zero Hour" (*Stunde Null*)—the reset moment where a reckoning would have to take place.

This reckoning would be complex because, as we know, Germany became two states. Control of the country was supposed to have been a joint effort run through the Allied Control Council with a level of continuity cutting across its occupied zones. However, that broke down as the Soviet model was imposed on the East, and the West was organized around the interests of the U.S. and its allies. The question of which one represents

“Germany” is interesting as, because of the dominance of the memory of the Wilhelmine and Nazi periods and the reality that the German Democratic Republic (GDR [East Germany]) was on the Cold War’s losing side, there is sometimes a sense that telling German history, including that of its military, means discussing the First and Second World Wars, then the history of West Germany (the Federal Republic [FRG]), and then its reunified history with it “known” that there was a socialist Germany, but that that was an aberration inside Germany’s broader narrative. I’m unsure about that. Marx was much the German thinker, and Germany was the birthplace of modern social democracy. In the *Reichstag* election before Hitler’s take-over, a combination of the Social Democrats and Communists polled 37 percent— 4 percent more than the Nazis received. The leadership that built the East German state— Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht, Erich Honecker—were either persecuted by the Nazis or forced into exile. Nearly as much as Jews and other “*Untermenschen*,” “Bolsheviks” and “socialists” were posed as the Reich’s mortal enemies. The battle for control after Germany’s Revolution (1918) was between social democrats and communists—and we might not have had to reckon with German history if those parties could have found a way forward.¹³

In many ways, this concept captures the mentality of the GDR: *it* wasn’t to blame for the Second World War, the Holocaust wasn’t *its* idea (by definition, socialists opposed racial theory), and were conservatism left inside German cultural space that pointed towards fascism, that was a *Western* phenomenon—not the “better Germany’s,” as enthusiasts of East Germany referred to their project.¹⁴ The Soviets participated in disarming the country and de-Nazification was clearly a goal. However, the manner in which that was done was centered around the simple imposition of a new regime. “...the GDR never felt itself to be responsible for Nazism [nor for] coming to terms with it,” two historians have offered.¹⁵ Herein, when the *Volksarmee* was formed in ’56 (the East German army), it was little-imagined as boxed in by *Stunde Null* guilt. Outside the country, it was little-deployed. However, when, if on a

small scale, it participated in the crackdown on Czechoslovakia in 1968, that did *not* involve broad debates around “German militarism” or worry about baked-in totalitarianism in East German society.¹⁶ In the West (to the extent it was discussed), it was viewed as part of Moscow’s attempt to keep an iron grip on the East Bloc. For Eastern officials, the *Volksarmee* was helping maintain “socialist international law” (meaning largely the Brezhnev Doctrine), which justified intervention in the name of preserving the unified march of the socialist project.¹⁷

The *Bundeswehr* was different. The politics of West Germany couldn’t be pre-programmed in the same way as, theoretically, they needed to be a matter of *choice* (that was the claim of democracy). Moreover, the leadership didn’t prescribe to a unified ideology defined as the “enemy” in the same manner as socialism and communism were by the Nazi authorities. Moreover, the country needed to be brought within the Western fold—NATO, the EC—as it was *the* state on the Cold War frontline. The Allies thus sought to strike a balance: instilling regret and tamping down nationalism while allowing growth, a place for conservatism, and for it to be part of the West’s defense framework. The constitution instilled a number of principles: the illegality of preparing for “aggressive war,” that the country might join orders of “collective security” which sought a “peaceful order” (the eye was towards NATO), and that international law (largely meaning human rights principles) might take precedence, creating rights and duties for “inhabitants of the federal territory” (a quite striking statement).¹⁸ It’s been said West Germany’s defense culture had two sides. It wasn’t intended to “reestablish...unilateral...military policies,” return as a “leader” in European security, remain a “viable tool...in...pursuit of national interest,” or allow the mobilization of the armed forces based on “national sentiments.”¹⁹ It was to express a preference for “non-confrontational defense and deterrence,” an “opposition to war-fighting strategies,” and be encased in an atmosphere of “making amends” for previous wrongdoings.²⁰ The new

Germany shouldn't be demilitarized; America and its allies sought to avoid the *ressentiment* that followed World War I. Yet the thinking around the new West German army should acknowledge the crimes of the past and be folded inside the framework of Western defense interests. Generally, it mirrored the approach of the Western Allies to the post-War life of the country at large.

What most West Germans thought of this is deeply complex. As with today, center-right voters tended to favor a more forward role for the country within the Western Alliance. Konrad Adenauer, the first West German Chancellor (a Christian Democrat), sought a “policy of strength” (*Politik der Stärke*), seeing the FRG as having a role as a bulwark against Soviet communism.²¹ Initially, the Social Democrats, with their internationalist and socialist roots, exhibited more skepticism, making overtures towards pacifistic elements of social democratic philosophy. However, as they sought to work within the mainstream of politics, their leadership came on board with the FRG's partnership with the West and retaining a strong, though defensive (and multilaterally oriented) armed forces. However, late-‘60s cultural shifts—the rise of student protests and the revolt of the baby-boom generation—impacted the sensibilities around security culture. The reality was that, under the heading of rapid recovery, rehabilitating as opposed to purging society, and a sometimes-smarmy appeal to anti-communism, the West German government became filled with former functionaries from the Nazi state. “The perpetual challenging of the previous generation's Nazi past was what made the ‘68 movement in Germany different,” offered Gretchen Dutschke-Klotz, wife of Rudi Dutschke, perhaps the leading figure of West Germany's late-‘60s student movement.²² A complex of issues became increasingly pressing in the FRG: if it was acceptable that figures like Hans Globke, who had a hand in writing the Nuremberg Laws, could be Chief of Staff to the West German Chancellor (which he was), how Germany positioned itself vis-à-vis events like the Vietnam War (did its friendship with [and partial

control by] the Americans sanction dubious interventions?), and if cold warriorism and attachment to traditional social mores either went too far or had persisted too long. Was West Germany a force for good and modern democracy, or did it represent a latent traditionalism gussied-up and put forward in a new guise?²³

As the state which would ultimately win out, West Germany took a dual path. Willy Brandt's *Kniefall* in 1970 when visiting a monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a dramatic gesture—a clear act of contrition as he fell to his knees before a monument to Jews who resisted decimation in an armed resistance against Nazi occupiers. It was the ultimate statement of German humility—indicting militarism and signaling that the country's future lay with diplomacy (he'd win a Nobel Prize for his *Ostpolitik*). However, America stored nuclear missiles on German soil—a point of controversy over the course of the '80s—and figures like Helmut Schmidt and Kohl worried that NATO hadn't stationed enough troops in country to make a defense of the West. "NATO must be able to fight a general or total war in defense of Europe," Schmidt wrote.²⁴ The nation was sorry. However, large sectors of its political class maintained realist views when it came to defense.

The end of the Cold War clearly engendered reflection. Again, Germans considered the vicissitudes of World War II as the last time the country was unified. There was an "explosion of discussion about the National Socialist past in the public realm," one book has argued, in part because that could be had in a less-fettered manner.²⁵ However, this time the country also had a new history of violence to contend with as the repressions of East Germany came fully to light. Here, as the world careened toward Gulf War I, it was acknowledged the country owed the U.S. a political debt. However, there was rededication to principles of non-offensivity and a staid hand when it came to using German troops in international actions.²⁶ A turning point came with Kosovo (1999), when, concerned about an ethnic cleansing that might echo Bosnia, the Račak massacre unleashed worry about a new

wave of genocide.²⁷ In this case, the argument was that Germany might not just make amends for breaking humanitarian law but that it should participate in helping to *prevent* genocidal acts. Here, the *Bundeswehr* participated in its first combat operations since the army's founding. Gerhard Schröder, the country's Chancellor, argued the nation must react to a "higher principle"—one it had violated itself.²⁸

However, Kosovo didn't provide Germans with a sense of release from circumspection regarding military force. After Kosovo came 9/11 and, with NATO's invocation of Article 5 (that all NATO nations need come to each others' defense), Germany committed 3900 troops to fight the War on Terror. In the context of finding bin Laden, a central objective, Schröder could sell participation in Afghanistan as concerning justice in the international order (that point might have been born out when al-Qaeda attacks reached London and Madrid). That's while he argued that the country should stay out of "adventures," a term he applied to Gulf War II (Germany didn't send troops).²⁹ It sent them to Iraq in 2015. However, that concerned the particular brutalities of Islamic State.³⁰ Generally, it maintained a policy of not shipping weapons to conflict zones—though shipments to Saudi Arabia showed up in the war in Yemen. Those were stopped after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi—though a level of arms deliveries has crept back in.³¹ Finally, the country was careful after the annexation of Crimea and in the months preceding the Ukraine invasion. To the chagrin of some of its allies, Merkel and Scholz held off on shutting down Nordstream 2 as a means of not raising tension between Russia and the West. One hears of *Wandel durch Handel*—change through trade. I wonder if *Verhandlung* (negotiation at large) wouldn't better describe the German stance.

However, we might also note that's happened while Germans have focused on their democratic *bona fides*. It's a point that I feel is often missed: that there may not be a better functioning, more internationally oriented major democracy anywhere today. We might note

a few things. First, save the *Alternative für Deutschland's* electoral success in 2017 (the first time since the Second World War a far-right party entered parliament [ninety-four seats]), the country has tacked noticeably centrist. It has been dominated by parties committed to democratic principles (the Christian and Social Democrats), and since the Economist Intelligence Unit began releasing its democracy index in 2006, Germany has never ranked lower than the world's sixteenth-most-democratic state.³² Indeed, the one time the right had success—a phenomenon throughout Europe after 2015—it's interesting to see the reaction that came in the next *Bundestagwahl* (2021): voters gave more than 80 percent of their vote to parties in agreement on a few basic principles—the right to asylum, the EU's importance, strong democratic institutions, and a public discourse based on relative respect. Indeed, throw in the *Die Linke* (the left-socialists), roughly agreeing on asylum, democracy, and the tone of debate, and that total leaps to close to 90 percent (it should be noted, though, that the party is skeptical of NATO and the EU). The current governing coalition is deeply indicative: while it includes the Social Democrats, Free Democrats, and Greens, it could have included the Christian Democrats, who governed with the Social Democrats throughout the Merkel years. That represents *massive* parts of the German public—a consensus that pro-internationalist democrats in any number of places would salivate to have.

Then there are questions of humanitarian attitudes. Germany took in more than *a million* migrants during the Syrian Civil War; for weeks, global headlines featured Germans at train stations holding signs of welcome for incoming refugees.³³ Now, this garnered a backlash (as, again, throughout Europe). Yet that was slapped back. The *Alternative*, as the party standing “tough on migration,” lost ground in the last election, and no party has been willing to work with it in parliamentary terms. Indeed, as of spring of this year, the government had put the *Alternative* under surveillance for suspicion of far-right extremism.³⁴

Finally, there's been *massive* work to seal the truths of the Nazi period into the

culture. The memorialization is vast—Germany’s *Stolperstein* (bronze bricks in sidewalks in front of the homes of those killed in the Holocaust) constitute one of the world’s largest memorials, with the number of individual designations near 80,000.³⁵ Vast attention is given to the Holocaust in the nation’s school system, and the breadth of public space dedicated to World War II and the Shoah is simply extensive. Symbolic might be the glass cupola that crowns the *Bundestag*; designed by Norman Foster, its glass surface, angles, and use of emptiness to fill a space once symbolizing the traditional German state is a reminder of agony atop the nation’s parliament. Indeed, the issue is just central to so many discussions. I’ll return to Scholz’s speech: “many of us have the stories of our parents and grandparents in our ears as concerns war;” Germans knew what their country had done. However, if asked if “power should contradict justice,” *because* Germany knew what that meant, a nation that had moved cautiously should land in one place: defending democracy and a neighbor which had come under naked attack. A change of era (*Zeitenwende*) had come. Germany should step from the shadows and occupy a more forward place as concerns Western security. The idea received extensive applause—in the parliament and from its allies around the world.

So, what happened? And what might?

To a degree, nothing. In his *Bundestag* speech, Scholz promised €100 billion in funds to upgrade the *Bundeswehr* and he got it, reaching a deal among the country’s four central parties. Achieved on May 29th, Scholz tweeted the “special fund is coming.” It was a “huge” step for German and European security.³⁶

The Scholz coalition also reached a deal to peg defense spending at 2 percent of its annual budget, if not year by year, then by an average through time (2 percent being the NATO commitment.) While as a point through which to needle the continent, it was a frequent Trump argument: too many European countries didn’t meet the criteria for defense

minimums. Germany was now going to take up the challenge.

The country has also sent weapons—vis-à-vis Ukraine, perhaps the greatest issue concerning the new defense posture. The German arms industry brought in over €9 billion in 2021.³⁷ Again, though, the idea was that out of a commitment to non-aggression, weapons were *not* to be shipped into conflict zones. Again, to say that hadn't happened is not quite true. However, there was a new tone. The question wasn't just rifles or bullets. It was a full range of weaponry, including the heavy guns and munitions which the Ukrainians needed. It was a "Churchill moment," some said, as the tone was grittier with Germany posing itself as a leader among allies.³⁸

However, what followed was an odd level of feet-dragging. Now, war guilt, or *Stunde Null* consciousness, was often at least partially imposed from the outside. Denuding Germany's armed forces and reductions of its territory were modes of the outside world expressing concern over what Germans might do.³⁹ Yet, Scholz's February 27th speech was met with universal relief. After bizarre proclamations in the week leading up to the conflict that it would send 5000 helmets to help the Ukrainians, Germany would now jump into the fray.⁴⁰ However, "jumping" isn't exactly what happened. Light weapons were sent, yet heavy guns remained stockpiled.⁴¹ The country did *not* lock into 2 percent every year—the "average" being a signal that some MPs didn't want to be seen as overly acquiescent to the U.S. or NATO. Indeed, it was in June that really serious armaments began to show up, and while heavier guns have arrived, like howitzers, at the moment of writing, there is still a massive debate over whether Germany might send tanks (all in all, it's given the same amount of military aid as Poland and Canada; much smaller countries).⁴² And while 63 percent of Germans supported deliveries after the *Bundestag* speech, by May, that number had dipped to 46 percent.⁴³ Shortly after his "Churchill moment," Scholz was in Sweden guaranteeing that country's defense (it had yet to apply for NATO membership).⁴⁴ However,

quickly, Scholz moved to avoiding more stringent statements, leaving them to Annalena Baerbock, his Green foreign minister.⁴⁵

This might be explained in a few different ways. The first concerns polls: the German voter has proved trickier than thought. There is a camp that has long thought the country should deal more firmly with Russia. However, parts of Scholz's party, the Social Democrats, have been less than sure, wondering if that matches with the legacy of things like Brandt's *Kniefall* and his *Ostpolitik*. Many still feel responsible for Germany's history with Russia, and some feel there's no European security absent the Kremlin's inclusion.⁴⁶ This overlaps with *Die Linke*, which insists Germany is making itself a *Kriegspartei* (party to war) by following NATO and downgrading amicable ties with the Putin regime. Of course, that doesn't answer the question of if there's a point when he should be stopped. In the Donbas? Kiyv? At the border with Poland? Putin's not Hitler. Yet, he invaded a country that held a revolution in 2014 to get closer to Europe and has sought to carve a path forward as a modern democracy. I'm not sure comparisons to the Iraq invasion—something one hears from those who want to suggest the West should stay out—are precisely on spot.⁴⁷

Point two is that Russia rattled the nuclear saber. "...everyone knows we have [nukes]," Putin said recently, "and we will use [them] if necessary to defend our sovereignty."⁴⁸ This makes some Germans, who were already unsure about U.S. nukes on their soil, a touch squeamish. For years, they were the Cold War frontline. Returning to those dynamics is less than comfortable for some. As Scholz told *Der Spiegel*: "there must be no nuclear war;" it was a reason to be cautious with weapons deliveries.⁴⁹

Finally, attitudes towards the U.S. and Russia can be varied. A recent commentary on Deutsche Welle noted that there's a meaningful vein of anti-Americanism in German society. This comes from '60s protest, the anti-nukes movement, and was reinforced by perceived U.S. imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵⁰ *Europe* can have a love-hate

relationship with its American cousins, seeing them sometimes as great allies and other times the seat of “venality [and] inauthenticity” themselves.⁵¹ That’s while we should remember that such anti-Westernism was a matter of policy in the old East Germany until ‘89, as was the institution of Russo/Soviet-German friendship. Today, the *Left* and *Alternative*—the parties critical of support for Ukraine—gain their greatest support in the country’s East. It’s vivid on maps: in the former East Germany, the *Alternative* often scores upwards of 20 percent and the *Left* over 10—double their tallies on a national scale.⁵² In the old West? Their voters are just hard to find.

Now, there is more than one position to take on the Ukraine conflict. Did NATO expand too fast, and can we point out a myriad of ironies about the West getting worked up about Putin’s behavior while it’s hardly kept its hands to itself? Maybe. In the ‘90s, Russia sought guarantees that the Western alliance wouldn’t expand into former Warsaw Pact lands, and there’s a debate about if those assurances were in fact made.⁵³ We know a range of foreign policy experts warned there were dangers to NATO expansion, and Obama’s post-Crimea comments about Russia being a “regional power” were perhaps ill-advised.⁵⁴ Ukrainian society also has its far-right extremisms; the Azov Battalion, Mariupol’s last holdouts, flies symbols that look like neo-Nazi symbology.⁵⁵ Press coverage in Russia is clearly one-sided. In the West? It’s more balanced; but it would be hard to say it’s exactly unbiased.⁵⁶

Still, NATO didn’t fire a bullet at Russia, nor did Poland invade Belarus because there was an “enemy at the gates” (a Russian proxy at the door, as Russia says Ukraine is to NATO). Germany and France tried to talk Putin down; to get him to not start a war which has killed tens of thousands of people.⁵⁷ Scholz met Putin, trying to ease pressures and asking him to back down.⁵⁸ Yet, that’s the point: that attitude, and decades of caution, allow Germany to occupy a kind of high ground. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*

puts it well: the society's done the "civic work" to make it not just "tolerant of difference, sensitive to disparities in [an individual's] life chances, and cognizant of its...role in Europe [and] the world," but to make it a *leader* in such things."⁵⁹ It's kept the right memories alive, and it's tried to make good—and when path changes come, they're taken for meaningful reasons and it takes time to explain. For me, and I'd guess many who see something at stake in this ongoing conflict, Germany doesn't need to move from *Stunde Null* to "Stunde None." Its people are democrats, its thoughtfulness proven, and it can stand up for those values internationally and with a full seat among the powers who, if imperfectly, attempt to advance such ideals. Indeed, due to its past, Germany comes with something the rest of us need—a bit more reflectiveness, an extra try for diplomacy, and real time taken to talk issues through. Thus, when it acts, we know that it's serious—as few of us would not say the situation in Ukraine most certainly is.

ENDNOTES

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1. E.g., Kathryn Q. Seelye, "Obama's Inaugural Reflects the History of Civil Rights," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/world/americas/18iht-civil.1.19454062.html>; David Osborne, "Barak Obama Wins His Place in History," *Independent*, November 5, 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/barack-obama-wins-his-place-in-history-992750.html>.
 2. The White House, "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09," June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.
 3. See Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine Fears Western Support Will Fade as Media Loses Interest in the War," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/12/ukraine-fears-western-support-will-fade-as-media-loses-interest-in-the-war>. See also Alena Botros, "The OECD Just Put a Wrinkle on What 'Putin's Price Hike' is Causing the World Economy. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine is Piling up Trillions in Damages," *Fortune*, September 26, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/09/26/russia-invasion-ukraine-cost-trillions-global-economy-oecd/>.
 4. See James J. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
 5. BBC, "Ukraine Conflict: What We Know about the Invasion," February 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60504334>.
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