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Britain Never Understood Europe — Germany Had No Choice But To Do So



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I first encountered Europe not as an abstract political project but as a lived reality in Bonn between 1971 and 1973, just as Britain entered the European Community (EC). As a young diplomat, one of my tasks was to study how the German Parliament scrutinised directives coming from Brussels. It seemed technical work at the time. Looking back, it revealed something far more important: Britain and Germany approached Europe from fundamentally different political worlds.

The Bundestag already possessed what Westminster lacked: highly professional officials servicing parliamentary committees and supporting policy scrutiny. Britain would only develop a comparable system after 1979. Germany also faced the complexity of federalism; many matters affected by European legislation fell within the competence of the Länder rather than the federal government.

Yet the deepest lesson was political rather than institutional. For the Federal Republic, making membership of the European Community succeed was not simply a policy priority—it was a national mission.

Post-war Germany saw European integration as the path to rehabilitation after the catastrophe of the Second World War. Thomas Mann had captured the idea in 1953 when he spoke of creating “a European Germany” rather than “a German Europe.” European integration was the means by which Germany could re-enter history as a democratic, trusted power.

This demanded compromise, particularly with France. Accommodating French concerns was not weakness but strategy. The European project was understood in Bonn as existential.

Britain viewed matters differently. In Whitehall, Europe was approached transactionally—a “Common Market” to be managed rather than a political destiny to be embraced. Alongside this sat a recurring fear that joining Europe threatened Britain’s sovereignty and centuries of national history. Germany saw Europe as redemption. Britain saw it as a bargain.

That difference would echo for decades.

In the early 1970s, the Bank of England’s counsellor in Bonn assured us that Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was impractical fantasy. Yet European leaders were already thinking

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further ahead. Chancellor Willy Brandt and President Georges Pompidou had backed plans for monetary integration at The Hague summit in 1969.

History repeatedly made fools of those who assumed European integration had reached its limits.

By the time I returned to the Foreign Office's Western European Department in 1983, old divisions in outlook remained. Margaret Thatcher's Europe was dominated by battles over Britain's budget contribution. Helmut Kohl, Germany's new Chancellor, viewed Europe in broader strategic terms.

One of my earliest tasks was interpreting a telephone conversation between the two leaders. It quickly became clear they were speaking almost entirely past one another. Thatcher focused on budget disputes; Kohl on Europe's larger political trajectory.

The contrast reflected differing systems as well as personalities. Britain revolved around an immensely powerful Treasury. Germany operated through coalition politics, an independent Bundesbank and multiple centres of authority.

Then history accelerated.

The symbolic power of Kohl and François Mitterrand holding hands at Verdun in 1984 reflected a Europe built on reconciliation. Meanwhile Jacques Delors advanced plans for a deeper Community and eventually renewed efforts toward monetary union.

Britain reacted with increasing suspicion.

Thatcher's Bruges speech in 1988 warned against a European "superstate." Although often remembered as criticism of bureaucracy in Brussels, it became something larger: a political declaration of Euroscepticism. The speech helped inspire a movement that increasingly portrayed Europe not as reformable but as fundamentally hostile to British interests.

Events in Germany soon transformed everything.

In June 1989 Helmut Kohl's adviser Horst Teltschik privately warned us that East Germany was entering a "pre-revolutionary" phase. Few fully grasped what that meant.

On 9 November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell.

Within weeks East Germans abandoned dreams of reforming the German Democratic Republic into a socialist alternative. "Wir sind ein Volk"—we are one people—became the dominant slogan.

German Economic and Monetary Union followed rapidly. Introducing the Deutschmark into East Germany was not merely economics; it was politics. It represented the fastest route to unification and the only realistic means of halting mass migration westward.

But reunification had enormous consequences. A larger, stronger Germany revived old European anxieties. One response among Germany's partners was to accelerate monetary union. As William Keegan, David Marsh and Richard Roberts later observed, EMU became partly a way of embedding a reunified Germany within stronger European structures.

Britain failed to appreciate the political logic.

Debates over joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) were treated largely as technical or economic questions. Yet Europe was never merely an economic project.

The British government compounded matters by insisting that ERM entry remained a sovereign British decision rather than a genuinely negotiated European undertaking. Cabinet discussion was limited. Parliament was largely bypassed.

When Britain joined in 1990, key questions—especially the exchange rate—were inadequately settled with partners.

Black Wednesday in September 1992 exposed the consequences.

Much blame was placed on currency speculators or the Bundesbank. But Britain's deeper problem was political misunderstanding. European arrangements rested on consultation and mutual obligation. Britain continued acting as if participation was a purely national calculation.

The scars endured.

The anti-federalist movement born during Maastricht evolved into UKIP. Conservative divisions deepened. Europe became less a policy issue than a civil war within British politics.

David Cameron's referendum was intended to settle that conflict. Instead it institutionalised it.

The tragedy is that Britain never adequately explained Europe to itself. The European Union was not simply a market or bureaucracy. It was one of history's most successful peace-building projects, transforming a continent repeatedly consumed by war into one largely defined by cooperation and stability.

I was reminded of this in 2003 at a meeting of the Parliamentarians. A Ukrainian delegate passionately praised the European Union. A British Eurosceptic MP asked me. Why would anyone want to join such a ghastly club?

My answer was obvious. If your country had spent decades trapped inside the Soviet sphere, the EU represented democracy, prosperity, security – and peace. For the UK, NATO provided security and the economic value of EU was underestimated. Voting for Brexit in 2016 was not risky.

And now? Putin and Trump – both Brexit supporters - have transformed the security landscape for the worse.

The EU is relevant to national security. The UK, France and Germany are leading European efforts to support Ukraine which has just started negotiations on EU membership. But still, it will be a long road for both Ukraine and the UK.

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