

Today's itinerary: Germany (by Joe Klein)
Subject: Germany's long national coma

A few weeks ago, Sir Charles Powell told me a story, which he has probably told a thousand times, about visiting Germany with his old boss, Margaret Thatcher. Their host was Helmut Kohl, who took them to his hometown of Oggersheim, and to lunch at his favorite bistro and to the cathedral at Speyer, where the first holy Roman emperors—the first pan-Europeans—were buried. At the cathedral, Kohl took Powell aside and said: "It is absolutely crucial that Mrs. Thatcher knows that I consider myself a European first and a German second."

Powell and Thatcher returned to their plane. Thatcher kicked off her shoes, leaned back in her chair, and said: "Kohl is such a German."

The story says a bit more about Thatcher, perhaps, than it does about Kohl—but it says something about Germany, too. For 57 years, this has been the most admirable of nations. It responded with care, humility, and responsibility after the Nazi disgrace (it reserved its martial fervor for the football pitch, and even there was gracious enough to yield the World Cup to England in 1966, a reparation, perhaps, for the Blitz). West Germany stood on the front lines of the cold war, steadfast when the Soviets blockaded and then walled Berlin. It reunited graciously, generously with the east (indeed, at an estimated cost of €600bn, a sacrifice that still is having an effect on the domestic economy).

And it has been the most quietly persistent force in the formation of the European Union. Since the World War II, Germany has worked patiently not just to be accepted by its neighbors, but more—to subsume itself in them. It is as if the Germans don't quite trust themselves to be left to their own devices. "I don't know what will become of Germany," Konrad Adenauer once said, "unless we manage to create Europe in time."

Hence Kohl at the cathedral. Indeed, there is something crashingly Teutonic about the mania to become the precise opposite of Hitler's Reich: thoughtful and peaceful and fair and cooperative and just another country. The effort has been extraordinary, it permeates every corner of postwar German culture; it is as if a quiet decision was made, after 1945, to insert Prozac into the water supply. Political correctness rules; political contentiousness exists, but it is frowned upon; consensus is the Holy Grail. "There is the assumption that if we keep our heads down we're likely to have success," said Dr. Christoph Bertram, a national security expert. "And we have had a lot of success doing things that way. I wonder, though, if the time hasn't come for us to take a more active role, especially in Europe. Of course, if you use words like 'leadership,' you get pushed out of the room. Joschka Fischer [the German foreign minister] still talks about how fragile our basis of acceptance is."

Consensus is, of course, a natural consequence of a multiparty system, where alliances must be formed; all European countries have powerful elites who quietly organize the social arrangements. But there have been recent upheavals in the political cultures of Italy, France, and even the Netherlands; there are great debates about the future taking place all over Europe. In Germany, however, a ferocious blandness has set in. Public life has the congealed quality of a Bavarian Kartoffelsuppe left cooling on the stove overnight. Which leads to this week's questions: Has Germany become too nice for its own good? Has it consensualized itself into a coma?

"I think that sensibility is fading," a leading newspaper editor told me. "Look at the recent incidents of anti-Semitism." Indeed, there are two contremeps simmering—but either could easily be seen as an example of the enduring power of German political correctness. One concerns a novel called *The Death of a Critic*, by Martin Walser, a *roman à clef* about a novelist's revenge on a powerful Jewish critic who has assaulted his work. (Walser's own work has been ravaged by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, an aged and celebrated Jewish critic.) The *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which was to publish an excerpt, decided the book was too raw and reneged. Needless to say, the book would be a minor scandal in most other countries; in Germany, it has caused grave soul-searching about the revival of certain national "tendencies."

Then there is the Möllemann dispute. Jürgen Möllemann, deputy chairman of the right-of-center Free Democratic Party, a former paratrooper who has been known to skydive into political rallies, recently said that Ariel Sharon's government in Israel and certain members of the German Jewish

establishment—he named one, in particular, a journalist named Michael Friedman—were bringing anti-Semitism upon themselves by their extreme behavior. There was an immediate uproar, of course. There were calls for Möllemann's head. The Free Democrats, who have been rising in the polls on a Thatcherite agenda, dithered a bit and then chivvied an apology from Möllemann. Two hours after he apologized, though, Möllemann issued a clarification: The apology didn't apply to Friedman. The notion that Jews bring anti-Semitism upon themselves is repulsive, of course—and the possibility that Möllemann is trolling for the votes of German Arabs and native anti-Semites is even more so—but the comments themselves are mild compared to the opinions routinely found in European newspapers: the cartoon in *La Stampa*, for example, of the baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by Israeli tanks.

The German sensitivity to anti-Semitic nuance can't be gainsaid ... or can it? In both cases, there is an unhealthy edge of panic—the assumption that if the genie gets out of the bottle there will be jackboots on the Rhine before you can *sieg heil*. But there are consequences to such skittishness, to a public debate where only the alleged victims are allowed to speak freely. Paul Spiegel, the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, called the Möllemann affair "the biggest insult uttered by a party in the federal republic since the Holocaust." Yet no one was able to say, "Paul, put a lid on it," for fear of being accused of anti-Jewish sentiments themselves. I suspect the role of national conscience is not a long-term winner for Germany's Jews, any more than the role of national scourge was.

There is another consequence: This frantic German thoughtfulness has led to a society so well padded that no one is willing to take a risk, a society where no one feels comfortable asserting herself. The muffled public debate bores most people silly ... and the risk-free economy is sinking under its own weight.

There is, yes, consensus on the latter point. The words "Everyone knows what has to be done" were uttered to me no fewer than 10 times during the course of the week, by leading politicians of all four parties, newspaper editors, economists, and the inevitable taxi driver. "Everyone knows" the economy has to be reformed. The huge manufacturing combines that produce high-quality cars and other products remain brilliantly productive. But almost every other sector is suffering. The strict labor arrangements agreed to by, say, Volkswagen, have become the national norm, but they tend to cripple entrepreneurs trying to start new businesses (the rate of new business formation is among the worst in Europe). The unemployment rate stands at 8.5 percent—but there are at least another 8.5 percent who have given up trying to work and are receiving a relatively comfortable level of state support.

The cost of hiring new employees is prohibitive, especially for small employers. "There are about 10 million people working in the shadow economy, many of whom also receive social assistance," said Roland Berger, a management consultant in Munich. "The black market is growing at about 5 percent per year—it's the only sector of the German economy that actually is growing. So the number of people paying for the welfare state keeps diminishing compared to the number of people getting paid. And then there's the demographic problem every country has—low birth rates, longer lives. The system as it stands can't be sustained."

Of course, not everyone agrees to the medicine that "everyone knows" will work: a thinner welfare state, a less restrictive labor market, a more competitive economy. "I cannot move until we get everyone in the boat," Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has told friends. But the unions will probably never get in the boat. His main opponent in the Sept. 22 election, Edmund Stoiber, takes great pains to reassure people that he has no intention of moving toward "American-style" capitalism, either.

The inertia is stultifying, but not impermeable. Twenty years ago, my contemporaries, the Greens, made a valiant run at the establishment; eventually they joined it (Joschka Fischer, a Green leader, is the most popular politician in the country). Recently there have been signs that the children of the Greens are growing impatient, too, but moving in a different direction from their parents—toward the neo-libertarian politics of the Free Democrat Party (or Yellows). These two groups, Green and Yellow, are far more interesting than the mummified middle. I'll talk to them this week.