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International Politics HSS 379

17 January 2023

Inaction Speaks Louder Than Words: Germany On Ukraine Amidst Russian Invasion

In recent years, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has brought the issue of leadership and international responsibility to the forefront of global political discussion. One country that has been both heavily criticized yet called upon frequently for assistive efforts is Germany, one of the major powers in European politics and a country with a complex history within the European continent, especially in relation to Russia. In this essay, we will explore Germany's position on the situation in Ukraine amidst the Russian invasion, examine the external and historical factors that have shaped its response thus far, and discuss the implications of its actions for the future of European politics and international relations. Through an examination of Germany's political and historical context, as well as its economic and diplomatic ties to both Russia and Ukraine, we will see how and why Germany has failed to establish a leadership position in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and what the consequences of that choice have been and may be.

Historically, the collapse of the Soviet Union made a significant impact on Germany in a number of ways. Most critically, the splitting of the USSR led to the reunification of Germany, which had been divided into communist-controlled East Germany (GDR) and the Federal Republic of West Germany (FRG) since the end of World War II. This reunification brought about significant political, economic, and social changes for German citizens, as they learned to reintegrate with each other following massive changes in leadership and the expectations of their daily lives. Despite the removal of East Germany from Russian governance, many of the existing trade routes and economic ties continued after the collapse, leaving Germany still largely economically dependent on Russia, especially for their natural gas supply, a dependence which continues to this day. Additionally, the impact the end of the second world war had on Germany’s economy, their foreign policy, and the public psyche cannot be understated. The bombing of German cities during the war destroyed much of the country's infrastructure, and the country was also forced to pay large reparations to the victorious powers. The FRG was able to largely rebuild its economy and become one of the more stable countries in Europe, but the GDR struggled to rebuild and remained relatively poor. In regards to foreign policy, Germany was forced to renounce its aggressive expansionist policies and accept a more defensive and pacifistic role in Europe. This led them to becoming a member of the European Union, United Nations, and led to the country becoming a key player in the Western alliance during the Cold War. The public psyche was rattled after relentless suffering from bombings and lost loved ones, which led many Germans to resent the thought of ever going to war again. Ultimately, although Germany became a prominent figure in European diplomatic relations - entailing a great responsibility to lead - following the end of WWII and the collapse of the USSR, they adopted an isolationist status quo which has continued in the minds of its citizens and politicians until today.

More recently in 2014, following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Germany affirmed its isolationism by halting weapons sales to Ukraine in their long-standing policy of not sending weapons into “active conflict zones”. Despite publicly denouncing the actions of Putin as violation of international law, they failed to show leadership and make decisive action to deter him from further sponsoring fighting in Eastern Ukraine. Then, in 2021, Germany further blocked any weapons traveling to Ukraine from any country of origin from making its way through German territory. In a final act of disregard for Ukraine’s right to independence, they blocked the Royal British Air Force from flying to Ukraine through their airspace, and offered a measly supply of 5000 helmets as an apology for their inaction. They were rightly ridiculed by every other major power for their utter gall and continued feet-dragging.

On February 26 of 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany took some more decisive action. Economically, they immediately abandoned the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project which would bring more Russian natural gas into the country, and froze the assets of Russian businessmen and politicians in all German-based bank accounts. Furthermore, they promised to reverse their long-standing pacifist policy and send heavy weapons, tanks, and artillery to support Ukrainian resistance. Unfortunately, like their condemnation of Putin in 2014, Germany appears to again be all bark and little bite. Although it is true that the German government “had earmarked 1.4 billion euros to help Ukraine buy weapons, including 400 million euros destined for the European Peace Facility's funding for Kyiv” (Siebold et al.), it has also failed to deliver most of the pledge weaponry, citing the fact that “Germany's own military's stocks are too depleted to send any heavy battlefield weapons like tanks and howitzers while those the German industry has said it could supply could not easily be put into use” (Siebold et al.). Many critics have accused the German chancellor Olaf Scholz of using these excuses to avoid criticism internally from members of the Social Democrats (SPD), who continue to have ties with Russia today. Whether this is true or not, Germany has continued to display a lack of leadership despite its massive power, influence, and responsibility in the European narrative.

Ultimately, Germany has failed in many ways to address the mounting pressure from external states to step up and support Ukraine in its fight against Russian invasion. Though they have made economic sanctions, it has not been enough to cripple Russian sentiments, and they have yet to cross the line into directly sending weapons or troops to support Ukrainian efforts. The criticism they have received over this indecision is justified, as Germany needs to recognize its role as an influential actor in the European narrative, and perpetuate that which is best to promote democracy and uphold international law within its neighborhood. Whether they will do so now, when external pressures reach a breaking point, or whether they will never involve themselves in this particular conflict, it is becoming hard for Germany to ignore how its passive policies affect their global image. As The Guardian puts it, “It’s certain, too, that Germany has suffered a rude geopolitical awakening. Berlin can no longer duck its wider leadership responsibilities, especially for European security” (The Observer).  
 In conclusion, while Germany's position on the situation in Ukraine amidst the Russian invasion is complex and nuanced, and is shaped by a variety of historical, economic, and political factors, it is clear that Germany has ultimately continued their isolationist tradition in a post-1945 world. While Germany is a key member of the European Union and has a strong commitment to the principles of international law, it also has a long-standing relationship with Russia and is heavily dependent on Russian energy resources. The historical context, including the reunification of Germany, the end of WWII and the collapse of the Soviet Union, have had a great impact on the German position. Germany's failure to take decisive action and establish a leadership position in the crisis has had serious consequences for the future of European politics and international relations, and raises questions about the country's ability and willingness to take on a leading role in addressing future global conflicts.

Works Cited

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