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Merritt, Richard L.

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POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN GERMANY:  
THE YEARS OF SEMISOVEREIGNTY, 1949 - 1955

Richard L. Merritt<sup>+</sup>

When the American Military Government was replaced in 1949 by the U.S. High Commission for Germany (HICOG), it continued the series of public opinion surveys conducted since 1945 in the American zone of occupation and in 1951 even expanded them to include nationwide samples. The resulting data were analyzed and presented in periodic reports published by the HICOG Reactions Analysis Staff; the datacards themselves were lost or destroyed.

Among the topics included in the surveys were the West Germans' transition from Nazi domination through a decade of occupation by foreign powers to substantial independence; the Federal Republic's relations with the East, German reunification, rearmament, and West European unity; responses to American information programs; and the view of East Germans on a variety of topics. Taken together the data indicate that the years of semisovereignty produced (or strengthened) a new orthodoxy in the Federal Republic. The FRG was not the model democracy for which American occupiers had initially hoped, but it was a popular, stable, and effective democracy in a formal sense.

The rise of the German phoenix from the ashes of World War II has been a topic of never-ending scholarly fascination. During the war itself, some Allied writers and statesmen had called for the destruction, or at least dismemberment and pastoralization, of the country from which three major wars had sprung in less than three generations. Final wartime decisions nonetheless foresaw the eventual resumption of its rightful place in the comity of nations by a peaceful, democratic, united Germany. Deepening hostility among the victors was to frustrate this goal. By mid-1949 the country had indeed been dismembered: Poland and the Soviet Union had incorporated some of it into their own territory, and the remainder had been divided into two states, with the tiny enclave of West Berlin left under western Allied control but surrounded by the hostile German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The areas of prewar Germany (excluding Berlin) occupied by the American, British, and French military were merged in 1949 to form the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Initial antagonisms among the three western Allies had ultimately given way in the face of a perceived Soviet threat to a willingness both to cooperate with

each other and to reconstruct the western rump of Germany as a bulwark against the new enemy. In 1946 the American and British merged their zones of occupation into what came to be called "Bizonia," and with the London agreements of 1947-48 came the addition of the French zone and a general currency reform for "Trizonia." The London agreements also called for a constituent assembly that would draft a constitution for the trizonal area. This constitution - or "Basic Law" as the West Germans termed it, to indicate that it was only a provisional document - provided the basis for the promulgation in September 1949 of the Federal Republic.

Although nominally sovereign, the Federal Republic continued under the tutelage of the western Allies until May 1955. American, British, and French military governments were replaced by High Commissions, which retained certain tights of occupation, most notably in the areas of foreign policy and defence. (1) Along with these rights came a deeply-felt responsibility to see to it that the FRG would develop into a strong but peaceful ally. This meant pumping vast sums into West Germany to build up its economy. It meant laying the groundwork for West German defense forces that could contribute to western defenses. And it meant creating a set of institutional bonds in the field of politics and economics that would tie the FRG inextricably to its West European neighbors.

The half-dozen years of semisovereignty comprised a period of immense growth for the FRG. Political stability reigned at home, under the firm (or, in the view of this opponents, sometimes authoritarian) hand of Konrad Adenauer, the FRG's first Federal Chancellor. Its economy was still in ruins in 1949, but by 1955 the country had achieved full employment as well as a moderate level of prosperity. It was well on its way to becoming the economic giant that it is today. The FRG had joined with France, Italy, and the Benelux countries to form the European Coal and Steel Community, which by 1955 was moving toward a more general European Economic Community. Moreover, despite the dashed hopes for a European Defense Community, a way had been found to permit the FRG to rearm under the aegis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Functioning democracy in West Germany itself and such international measures as the decision to pay reparations to Israel for the crimes committed against the Jews by the Nazi regime allayed at least the western world's fears about the future of the country.

In short, by late 1954 only the permission of the western Allies was lacking to permit the Federal Republic to assume full sovereignty over its own affairs. The Paris agreements of that October paved the way, and in May 1955 the FRG launched its course of independence. Under Adenauer's continued leadership, it moved even more toward West European economic union, took the steps necessary to set up a new military establishment (albeit under strict controls to maintain its democratic character, and fully integrated into the NATO concept), and undertook new diplomatic initiatives, almost always to be sure in full consultation with the former occupying powers.

### HICOG Surveys

The general historical lines of the period of semisovereignty are well known. (2) What is less understood is the set of perspectives -values, beliefs, and attitudes- that moved the West German population during these difficult years. To what extent had they really thrown off the yoke of Nazism? How much legitimacy did they accord the new federal government? What did they think about their country's future rearmament, or economic ties with France and the rest of West Europe, or the threat of their security ostensibly posed by the Soviet Union? How important to them was the eventual reunification of all Germany? What hopes did they entertain that the eastern territories would be restored to Germany, that the FRG and GDR could in fact come to terms on a plan for merger?

All these questions and more are the stuff of which the West German domestic political scene was made. Public opinion might not be able to forge new policies for the FRG, but it could at least tell leading statesmen what the sources and limits of their public support were. Politicians, especially in the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), were quick to recognize the value of public opinion surveys -even if they often did not heed their findings on matters of policy. It is no small wonder, then, that surveying organizations flourished during the early 1950s in the Federal Republic. (3)

Very early in their occupation, American officials in Germany had understood the usefulness of public opinion surveys for their own purposes. Even before fighting had died down in some instances, social psychologists and sociologists in the Psychological Warfare Division of the U.S. Army entered towns to survey their populations' potential for resistance, attitudes toward Nazism, and expectations about the pending military occupation. By October 1945 informal surveying had been institutionalized by the Opinion Survey Section of the Information Control Division, Office of Military Government (U.S.), which subsequently conducted 72 major surveys in the American zone of occupation. Topics explored by these OMGUS surveys were as diverse as attitudes toward Hitler, bathing habits, the growing split among the wartime Allies, and readership of newspapers and magazines. (4)

With the formal end of the military occupation in September 1949, the U.S. High Commission for Germany (HICOG) replaced the Office of Military Government, and the Opinion Survey Section became the Reaction Analysis Staff within the HICOG Office of Public Affairs. Surveying operations, under the direction of Dr. Leo P. Crespi, continued unabated. By the end of 1950 the Reaction Analysis Staff had both expanded its sample to include the whole of the Federal Republic and engaged the newly-formed Deutsches Institut für Volksumfragen (DIVO) to conduct the fieldwork. The Reaction Analysis Staff later became part of the Research Staff of the Office of Public Affairs, United States Embassy, when the Federal Republic attained virtually complete sovereignty in May 1955.

The HICOG Reaction Analysis Staff carried out more than 100 surveys of West German public opinion during its five and a half years of existence. The surveys were mainly of two types. Regularly monthly

surveys, requiring about three weeks of fieldwork, were based on interviews with approximately 3,000 adults in the territory that had formerly comprised the American zone of occupation, 500 in West Berlin, and 300 in the American-held enclave of Bremen in the former British Zone. They generally used a "split-sample" approach, giving slightly different questionnaires to the two halves of each sample. Second, in October 1950 "flash" surveys were introduced. They sought to ascertain very quickly the views of a relatively small number of people (about 640) living in major cities throughout the Federal Republic. The flash survey was replaced in March 1951 by an intermediate sample of 800 West Germans, selected nationwide on the basis of stratified probability procedures. (5) At the same time, the regular surveys were broadened to include a representative sample from the whole of West Germany and West Berlin. Occasional surveys of special samples, such as West Berliners or youth, also took place. Some of these, to be discussed in greater detail below, interviewed GDR citizens attending public events in West Berlin, or else former GDR citizens who had fled into the Federal Republic.

The data, whether stemming from surveys conducted directly under the auspices of HICOG officials or those developed by DIVO, were analyzed and presented in periodic reports published by the Reaction Analysis Staff. Most of the data cards themselves have disappeared -lost, some say, when the Rhine River overflowed its banks, or, alternately, destroyed when American archivists made an administrative decision that IBM cards were not worth preserving once they had been analyzed by the appropriate government agencies, or, perhaps, still packed in boxes stashed in a corner of some forgotten warehouse. (6) What remain is a set of 237 reports prepared from September 1949 to May 1955 and ranging in length from four to 369 pages (with the average 33 pages long).

#### SOME MAIN DIMENSIONS OF GERMAN POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Here is not the place to analyze in detail the full set of HICOG reports. (7) In them, the reader will find indications of West German public perspectives on matters as diverse as adult education and massive retaliation, West European unity and agricultural exhibits arranged by the United States Information Service (USIS). The following pages will merely point to some of the main dimensions of German public opinion from 1949 to 1955. One set of attitudes of particular interest to HICOG pollsters and later scholars deals with the West Germans' transition from Nazi domination through a decade of occupation by foreign powers to substantial independence. How did they view their Nazi past, Allied programs designed to bring democracy to their country, their new federal government? A second set centers on three aspects of West Germany's position in the world: its relations with the east, German reunification, and West European unity. Finally, data based on interviews with East Germans provide some interesting insights.

#### Coming to Terms with Nazism

The intent of the Allied occupation of Germany after World War II

was to ensure that the country would never again become a threat to its European neighbors and the peace of the world. Germans, for their part, could simply look about them to know that National Socialism had failed. But how did the people feel about the Third Reich? Was the war, with its attendant loss of life and physical destruction, a necessary consequence of National Socialism itself, or was it due merely to bad judgment on the part of its leaders? How would they respond to a resurgence of Nazism?

Data from the HICOG surveys reveal that, by the mid-1950s, West Germans had for the most part rejected the formal trappings of Nazism. These organizations and their leaders -not the German people- had thrust their country into a devastatingly destructive war. The population was in no mood to make the same mistake again. Even if some attitudes associated with Nazism might remain, politicians and parties identifying themselves too closely with the repudiated past had little future in the Federal Republic.

The data also underscore a second and equally important point: West Germans wanted the books closed on the Nazi era. Since those responsible for the war and the major crimes had been punished adequately (if sometimes unfairly), they argued in effect, it was time for the western Allies to quit imposing their restrictions upon German politics and society. This was particularly the case, in the West German view, if the West seriously wanted the Federal Republic as an ally in the struggle against "international communism". "The war is over", West Germans were saying; "Let's get on with the fight for peace with justice".

### From Foreign Occupation to Independence

Views of the past aside, the critical question facing Allied officials was how the population would respond to its new political system.

Prognostications ranged from bleak to euphoric, with most recognizing a democratic tendency that only time and constructive participation could make firm. It would require the entrenchment of certain kinds of habits -assuming civic responsibilities, becoming informed, voting, obeying just laws, paying taxes, making occasional short-term sacrifices in the community interest, and the like. HICOG officials could observe progress made (or not made) in many of these areas. What they also wanted to know was how the West Germans felt about the polity developing around them.

Data yielded by the HICOG surveys on the federal government, parties and elections, and the Federal Republic's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, suggest widespread acceptance by the West German public of their political institutions and leadership. There was, of course, a darker side. One problem was the continuing if low level of support for a new rightwing party -a situation which, although not likely to endanger democracy in Germany, nonetheless upset the western Allies. There was also substantial dissent on such policies pursued by the Adenauer government as those dealing with housing, the Saar, rearmament, reunification, and "reparations" to Israel. None of this

proved to be divisive. To the contrary, West Germans repeatedly demonstrated that they stood behind their government whatever their personal preferences and disappointments may have been.

What seemed to bother the West German public most of all were the continued Allied controls of their government's autonomy. Even the elation occasioned by the promulgation in May 1955 of the Paris accords, which ended the occupation, was tempered by the realization that the Allies retained some residual rights, that the FRG was not truly independent. Achieving this level of autonomy had been no mean task. And, ironically, given the Allies' earlier insistence on German disarmament, the most significant stumbling block was the way in which an independent West Germany should defend itself. Should Germany be rearmed, and, if so, how?

### Rearmament

Uppermost in the minds of the wartime Allies was the final destruction of Germany's military potential. At their meeting in Potsdam in mid-1945, Attlee, Stalin, and Truman agreed on "the complete disarmament and demilitarization of Germany and the elimination of all German industry that could be used for military production". By 1949, however, the world's climate had changed. American military officials, impressed by their view of the Soviet threat to West Europe, were agitating for a West German contribution to the western defense structure. And, in December of that year, in an interview with an American journalist, Chancellor Adenauer let it be known that he would favor participation by German military units in some type of western defense system but not a separate West German army. After the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950 the answer to the question of German rearmament was a foregone conclusion. The salient issues were timing and form.

HICOG data on attitudes toward rearmament were mixed, and depended very very much on the wording of the questions asked of respondents. Despite initial hostility to the idea of an independent West German army, there was substantial recognition that Germany could not be defended without West German participation. Schemes for integrating FRG contingents into a more general European army found increasing favor. Even the European Defense Community, proposed by René Plévan in late 1950, negotiated in 1952, and rejected by the French parliament in August 1954, seemed better than nothing to large numbers of West Germans. Support for the EDC nonetheless declined as the perception grew that the French were trying to attach conditions which would make the FRG a second-class member. The ultimate failure of EDC led to a new plan, embodied in the Paris agreements of October 1954 and realized in May 1955, which corresponded closely to the expressed German preference for a national army that would participate in the defense of West Europe rather than the integration of German divisions in a general West European army.

### Germany in the World

The Occupation Statute of 1949 left ultimate responsibility for the

conduct of West Germany's foreign relations with the western Allies. The years between 1949 and 1955 were nonetheless ones in which the Federal Republic was fashioning its future foreign affairs environment. By and large, Adenauer's government pursued a policy of firm alliance with the west, eschewing détente with the east temporarily in the hope that strength in the west would force the Soviet Union to adopt a more conciliatory policy. German rearmament, then, was tied closely to east-west relations in Europe and the world, the question of German reunification, and steps toward economic and even political integration in West Europe.

West Germans were somewhat ambivalent in the early 1950s about the role that their country should play between east and west. On the one hand, they expressed an attachment to the west, especially the United States, almost as strong as their antipathy to the east. They were capable, on the other hand, of putting aside sentimental preferences when they calculated the prospects for war between east and west, and asked themselves what role the FRG should play in the event one did break out. Those who longed for neutrality nonetheless recognized that such a course would be impracticable, if for no other reason that the United States would not permit a neutral Germany, and that refusal to go along with the west would merely postpone eventual West German sovereignty. Although they might have preferred otherwise, then, West Germans realized that they had no real choice but to opt for alliance with the West.

Sentiments in favor of reunification were uniformly strong. Few, however, were willing to achieve it by paying a political price, such as the acceptance of the Oder-Neisse line as the German boundary or the withdrawal of American guarantees of security. Many felt that a policy of strength vis-à-vis the Soviet Union would make reunification of Germany more likely. A decreasing number held out any hope that this goal would be achieved.

Throughout the early 1950s West Germans strongly backed steps to unite West Europe. The most significant concrete step during this period in the direction of West European unity was the European Coal and Steel Community, endorsed by more than two of three Germans. The European Defense Community, as noted earlier, was more problematic. Moderate West German resentments toward France emerged during two periods when the EDC was under discussions -first, the months before May 1952, when it had appeared to some that the French planned to use EDC as a means for limiting West Germany's autonomy; and, second, from late 1953 to the summer of 1954, when the French dragged their feet on ratifying the agreement. The Saar question, too, raised doubts in the minds of many West Germans about French intentions, but not enough to lead them to reject the more general movement toward West European unity.

All these data point to the fact that the West German population was not wholly convinced of the linkage between international institution-building in the economic sphere and the western defense alliance. Nationalistic leaders might have used this popular ambivalence as a basis for asserting a greater measure of West German independence in European and world politics. It is noteworthy, however, that the Adenauer government did not do so. It saw the somewhat unsettled state of public opinion rather as guaranteeing its freedom



of action to pursue policies that strengthened western defenses and West European integration.

### East German Perspectives

Berlin of the 1950s provided a unique opportunity for Allied officials to gain insights into the perspectives and behavior of East Germans. Despite the division in 1949 of Germany and Berlin, access between the two halves of the former capital city remained fairly free. HICOG officials could thus observe events in the Soviet-controlled portion of the city, and visits by East Berliners and other citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) gave the Reaction Analysis Staff an opportunity to conduct direct interviews. From August 1950 to the end of the occupation period, in addition to its more frequent and exhaustive surveys of West Germans and West Berliners, it conducted at least 19 separate samplings of East German views on a wide range of topics. (8)

Respondents presented a fairly bleak picture of daily life in the GDR. Each group had its own special complaints: young people about the pre-eminent position given to the Free German Youth, pupils about Marxism in their classes, farmers about collectivization, and housewives about food shortages. They were nonetheless fairly united in estimating the popular mood to be bad or very bad, and feeling that the East Germans themselves could do little to improve their political situation. They demonstrated a certain pride in their anti-government uprising of June 17th, 1953. Few, however, anticipated new demonstrations, and fewer still thought that new demonstrations would actually benefit GDR citizens.

GDR visitors to West Berlin had by and large a positive image of western life, political institutions, and leaders. They strongly supported western policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. They also listed reunification among their most important goals even though they were not at all sanguine about the prospects for achieving it. Least of all were they willing to see the west abandon its efforts toward West German rearmament and West European unity in what they saw as a futile attempt to placate the Soviet Union.

To the extent that the respondents were truly representative of their compatriots, these findings bore heavy implications for western policymakers. One point was that the west could count on considerable passive resistance in the GDR to any new moves by either Ulbricht's government or the USSR. Second, the west could be assured of substantial support from GDR citizens for its own policies -and the tougher these policies were, the better the East Germans seemed to like them! But third, by the same token, the west bore some moral obligation to East Germans not to let them down in their times of trial. The extent to which such perceptions strengthened or at least supported the militancy of the west, including the FRG, can only be guessed. What we do know from recorded history, however, is that West German statesmen frequently mentioned such points when defending their policies privately or in public.

A BALANCE SHEET

The data contained in the HICOG reports, which encompass West Germany's 56 months of semisovereignty, provide important insights into the changing social structure and perspectives of that country. West Germans demonstrated that Nazism as a movement was a thing of the past, that they were fairly solidly behind new federal government. As far as the dynamics of international politics were concerned, they lined up with the west, not only because of an antipathy to the Soviet Union or a desire to hasten their country's full autonomy, but also because they saw concrete advantages in being a member of the emerging western constellation. The decision to ally with the west meant, of course, acceptance of the prospect that Germany would not be reunited in the foreseeable future. Only by building by western strength, however, West Germans felt, could the Soviet Union be forced to give way on this issue.

In short, judging by public opinion data, the years of semisovereignty had produced -or strengthened, if you will- a new orthodoxy. The FRG was not the model democracy for which American occupiers had initially hoped, but it was a popular, stable, and effective democracy in a formal sense. Its very strength gave the Federal Republic the breathing space that it would need to expand of democracy's less formal aspects, such as social justice and equality. The firm hand of Adenauer, moreover, pushed the country persistently toward its rehabilitation in the world comity of nations. Even if complete independence escaped it in the early 1950s, the FRG would eventually achieve as much of it as any state has in the modern world. Whatever its more troublesome aspects, then, the political system that developed in West Germany from 1949 to 1955 provided a solid basis for autonomous and democratic growth.

FOOTNOTES

\*Financial assistance in preparing this report came from the Institute of Communications Research of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am also grateful to my wife, Anna, for comments on an earlier draft.

1 The last of these rights were not relinquished until mid-1968, after the FRG's parliament had passed the "emergency powers" bill. The western Allies continue to exert occupation rights and duties in West Berlin.

2 See Karl W. Deutsch and Lewis J. Edinger, *Germany Rejoins the Powers: Mass Opinion, Interest Groups, and Elites in Contemporary German Foreign Policy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959); Alfred Grosser, *Germany in Our Time: A Political History of the Postwar Years* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971); and Manfred Knapp, editor, *Die Deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen nach 1945* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1975). More generally, see Anna J. Merritt and Richard L. Merritt, *Germany since 1945: An Interdisciplinary Bibliography of English-Language Material on Postwar Germany, 1945-1975* (forthcoming).

3 Among these are Emnid, K.G., in Bielefeld, which produces a month-

ly newsletter; DIVO, in Frankfurt, which edited three volumes of data, Umfragen (Frankfurt-am-Main:Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1958-1962), covering the years 1957-1960; and especially Institut für Demoskopie, which continues to publish both a newsletter and occasional collections of data. For the period in question, see Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann, Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung, 1947-1955 (Allensbach am Bodensee: Verlag für Demoskopie, 1957).

- 4 See Richard L. Merritt, "Political Perspectives in Germany: The Occupation Period, 1945-1949", Social Science Information, 8:2 April 1969), 129-140. For summaries and an analysis, see Anna J. Merritt and Richard L. Merritt, Public in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945-1949 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970). Information about surveying during subsequent years in France, Great Britain, and Italy as well as West Germany may be found in Richard L. Merritt, "European Public Opinion and American Policy: The USIA Surveys," Social Science Information, 6:4 August 1967), 143-160. For data from 1952 to 1963, see Western European Perspectives on International Affairs: Public Opinion Studies and Evaluations, ed. Richard L. Merritt and Donald J. Puchala (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968).
- 5 Individual HICOG reports sometimes give detailed information on the samples surveyed (see particularly report no. 69 of 21 March 1951); complete sampling information and other documentation in the files of the United States Department of State have not yet been released.
- 6 Questionnaires and IBM cards for some of the later HICOG surveys are available at the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, Williamstown, Massachusetts. The full set of HICOG reports (a total of 7,817 pages) may be found in the library of the United States Information Agency (1750 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20547), Yale University's Political Science Research Library, and the Center for West European Studies at Harvard University.
- 7 For a fuller analysis of the HICOG series and summaries of each report, see Anna J. Merritt and Richard L. Merritt, Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany: The HICOG Surveys, 1949-1955 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press ( 1979).
- 8 For details on problems of sampling and interviewing East German visitors to the West, and for a discussion of the representativeness of the samples, see the introductory chapter to Merritt, Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany. See also Richard L. Merritt, "Public Perspectives in Closed Societies", in Foreign Policy Analysis, ed. Richard L. Merritt (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C.Heath and Company, Lexington Books, 1975), pp. 101-117.

Address all communications to: Richard L. Merritt,  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Department of  
Political Science, Urbana, Illinois 61801