

Germany's elusive Russia strategy

by René Nyberg

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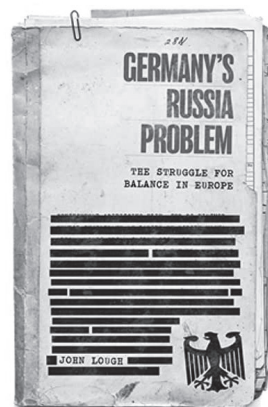
Germany's Russia Problem; The Struggle for Balance in Europe,

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GERMANY HAS BEEN traumatised by the loss of two wars, occupation and the Cold War. These experiences left a deep mark on the German psyche that to this day affect Berlin's ability to formulate policy. In his new book, British analyst John Lough deep-dives into the subject, drawing on a diverse body of historical literature. Lough, with a solid command of Russian and German, lived years in Russia and knows Germany well.

Germany's trauma and guilt differ starkly from the Finnish experience. Unlike Germany, Finland lost a just war, because it was attacked. The subject is delicate. Finland was never occupied, so Finnish women never encountered a Red Army soldier. Lough references in this regard the experiences of Helmut Kohl's wife, Hannelore Kohl, as a 12-year-old girl in Berlin. Aside from occasional instances of self-Finlandisation in the 1970s, when I served as vice consul in Leningrad, attempts to accuse Finland of complicity e.g. in the Siege of Leningrad were rare.

In Lough's view, Russia has skilfully exploited Germany's insecurity about its past,

repeatedly reminding it of its loser status. Underlying the relationship is a centuries-long history of interaction. He notes that no other country has such an extraordinarily deep and complex relationship with Russia as Germany. All the more remarkable given that Denmark signed a friendship treaty with Moscow (Om kærlighet, venskab og forbund) for mutual defence against Sweden in 1493, and the English charted a sea route to Arkangelsk in 1553.

Russia's interaction with the German world, which extends back centuries, became a relationship between states with the rise of Prussia. Unlike Sweden, however, Prussia and Fredrick the Great learned to be cautious in their dealings with Russia. Lough cites Bismarck's realisation that a defeated Russia would be a born enemy, and one in need of revenge. Indeed, Germany has learned to respect and fear Russia's military power that it instinctually avoids confrontation with Russia and accommodates Russia's interests where possible. Yet as Germany naturally seeks friendly contacts with Russia to calm its fear of confronta-

tion, it must also be wary of becoming too close to Russia for fear of alienating its allies and destabilising itself.

Germany and Russia's historical multi-layered relationship persists to this day. The bond of spilt blood of the two peoples is unparalleled. The treatment of prisoners of war on both sides is an example of a collective repressed memory, yet Russia's willingness to forgive the criminal acts of earlier generations and refusal to tar their descendants with the same brush has created a sense in Germans of both debt and obligation.

The shared experience the first world war, revolution and isolation inspired many leading German intellectuals, estranged from Western values, to latch on to a cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) that shifted their gaze to the East. Some lost their bearings in this shifting landscape. Stalin's labelling of the Weimar Republic's Social Democrats as "Social Fascists" created a common enemy for Communists and Nazis alike. Revolutionary change in Russia caused Germany in less than two decades to lurch from alliance to a war of annihilation.

With its unconditional surrender and occupation, Germany outsourced its strategic thinking to Washington. This did not go as far as relinquishing political goals such as German reunification, but Bonn never engaged in "grand strategy". This lack of a larger strategic framework led to Berlin's difficulties in adjusting to Moscow's strategic global moves. Germany also ceased to flex its hard power, instead preferring to build its economy and society around soft power. As Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference noted: Germany is a master of soft power, but soft power without hard power is like football without a goalie.

Lough finds that Germany's Russia policy, while consistent, has been ineffective. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been based on the assumption that active economic cooperation, combined with broad political and social engagement, could somehow set Russia on a path of political reform. This assumption is based on Germany's sincere belief that showing an understanding Russia's problems was in their own and Europe's best interest. Germany feels the need for harmonious relations with Russia due to a shared history that both increases German awareness of the fragility of their relationship and highlights the dangers posed by frictions in that relationship. Many Germans see Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as causing the breakup of the Soviet Union. The remaining aspects of *Ostpolitik* still strongly present in Berlin partly explain Germany's sense of discomfort over Russia's pivot to China at the expense of Europe. It contradicts *Ostpolitik*, which reflects a deep-seated conviction build over hundreds of years that there is a mutual complementarity between Germany and Russia, and that their relationship is a defining feature of Europe.

Loss in war, subsequent occupation and the existential threat of Communism in the Cold War strengthened the view that Germany must achieve a lasting reconciliation with Russia as it did with the West. The reunification of Germany strengthened the view that post-war German society had successfully made this transition. It reinforced the political class' take on the need to deepen European integration. But, according to Lough, Germany's Russia sensibilities should have raised doubts already in the late 1990s that European integration with Russia was unrealistic. Germany achieved peace and built a robust welfare state by abandoning its own path (*Sonderweg*), but nevertheless has had to passively watch Russia head down

its own path (osobyj put'). The chasm between what Russia was and what Germany hoped it could become only widened. By the end of the 1990s, Russia was no longer prepared to integrate with Western structures as it would have required surrendering a degree of its sovereignty. Moscow at the same time recognised the independence of former Soviet republics but not their sovereignty. As Boris Yeltsin pithily observed to Helmut Kohl: Only if Russia sees itself as secure can all other European countries feel secure.

For this reason, Germany's public debate has tiptoed around Berlin's decades-long misreading of Russia, which allowed their optimism to override realism. Germany heard the music, but couldn't place the tune. After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Angela Merkel presciently referred to the danger of Russia and Germany coming to alternative narratives on what had led to the reunification of Germany and the expansions of the EU and NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She appealed for an open discussion to avoid the Russian and German public forming divergent opinions. Lough points out that Putin's victory speech on the annexation of Crimea shows Merkel was correct in anticipating that Russia would develop its own historical narrative. German policymakers should have made it clear to Russia that the main driver of EU expansion to include Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary was a permanent resolution of the German question to the benefit of

both Europe and Russia. Through the recognition of the German-Poland border after reunification, the Polish question was also resolved.

Russia's reference point was not the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, but Yalta and Potsdam. In her 2014 speech, Merkel expressed incredulity that Europe was now experiencing a conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims thought to have been settled in previous centuries. Lough notes that Merkel's cold interpretation of the facts and prescriptions for action surprised not just Germany, but its European allies and the United States as well. Germany cleverly designed the EU's response in a way that insulated it from Russian attack while achieving the broadest possible impact.

Despite pacifist, even neutralist, instincts, Germany's institutions have shown themselves to be durable. The lack of focus on defence since the end of the Cold War also reveals the lack in big-picture strategic thinking. Germany is still without a long-term national security strategy with respect to Russia. Thus, while Merkel's abrupt policy shift in 2014 was significant, it remains within the framework of the 1960s policies that led to détente, i.e. selective cooperation, increased support for Russia's neighbours and commitment to NATO's in Europe, but Russia today is not..

The reviewer is ambassador and a fellow of RSAWS.