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D-Day 60th Anniversary A Time for Remembrance

View from Berlin

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Gerhard Schroeder's attendance at the 60th D-Day anniversary events in France will mark a turning point in Germany's post-war development. It's the first time a German chancellor has been invited to the commemoration ceremonies. As a government spokesman put it, this invitation is of "enormous symbolic importance", a sign that "times have in fact changed".

Indeed much has changed between Germany and its former enemies, even within the last decade. To begin with, the German Bundeswehr has started serving in NATO and UN-sanctioned international military operations. That step, taken during the Kosovo conflict in 1999, was a historical watershed. Today German troops are involved in eight missions abroad, including those in Afghanistan and the Balkans. The German military is cooperating closely with France and Britain in forming a joint European corp.

Second, by strengthening its multilateral commitments within the European Union, reunified Germany has dispelled fears (particularly among Britons) that it might exploit its increased size to become a resurgent regional power. Instead, Germany has sought to maintain Europe's political equilibrium while pushing EU enlargement forward. The German government, especially Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, has been outspoken about its vision of a federalist Europe. The commitment to deeper European integration remains strong.

And finally, Germany has demonstrated a new-found self-confidence by resisting US pressure to support the Iraq war. That move, which helped Gerhard Schroeder win a second term as chancellor, would have been unthinkable fifteen years ago during the Cold War when Germany was utterly dependent on the US for its security. As expected, Schroeder's refusal to help in Iraq damaged Berlin's relations with Washington and London. But it went down extremely well in like-minded Paris.

By saying *yes* to Afghanistan and Kosovo but *no* to Iraq, Germany articulated a newfound degree of autonomy and assertiveness. Schroeder may have gone a bit far in using the word "emancipation" to describe Germany's foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States. But it made the point: Germany has come of age. The country sees itself as a driving force in the EU, a principled multilateralist state committed to peace and prepared to take on international responsibilities.

Important as these developments may be, however, their significance for Germany's postwar "rehabilitation" pales in comparison with one thing: the passage of time. Gerhard Schroeder has been asked to attend the D-Day ceremonies in France not just because he's a good European or sees eye-to-eye with Jacques Chirac on Iraq. No, Schroeder has been invited because he represents the first generation of German leaders who have no living recollection of the war.

When allied troops landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944, forming a bridgehead to defeat Nazi Germany, Gerhard Schroeder was just two months old. Most Germans today were not alive when the US, Britain, France, Canada, Poland and other allies launched the largest amphibious invasion the world had ever seen. Indeed, many German families today reach back three generations without a living memory of the war. Under these circumstances, it's hard to prosecute a case of collective guilt.

The situation was different ten years ago. Then, in 1994, Germany was still led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who, despite his very close ties with French President Francois Mitterrand, was not invited to attend the 50th anniversary D-Day events. The snub is said to have saddened Kohl and soured Franco-German relations. But memory of the war was still very much alive. The time was not yet ripe.

For Germany, the invitation to participate in the 60th D-Day ceremonies is an unprecedented expression of acceptance, a signal to the nation's collective conscience that the ghosts of its past are truly in retreat.

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