



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

The Federal Republic in Central and Eastern Europe (February 17, 1995)

In a speech delivered in Prague in 1995, Czech president Václav Havel broached the difficult subject of German-Czech reconciliation and discussed the important role that Germany played in his country's history. For his compatriots, Havel explained, Germany symbolized both hope and danger, but he himself was optimistic. He expressed faith in Germany and in its readiness to help integrate Central Europe into the Western alliances.

"Czechs and Germans on the Way to a Good Neighborhood," Charles University, Prague, February 17, 1995

Your Magnificence,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Our generation is living at a time that may well be seen one day as a time of a great historic change. It is a time when, not without difficulty, a new international order is coming into being, when many states are making efforts to redefine their character, their identity and their position on the international scene, when a quest for a whole new spirit in the coexistence of peoples, nations, cultures and entire spheres of civilization is under way on this planet. We can say that we have arrived at a crossroads and find ourselves confronted with a great challenge. Inevitably, the present is also a time of new reflections, including a review of history, and a new stocktaking.

It is not only that the upcoming 50th anniversary of the end of World War II invites us to think about what conclusions we can draw, in hindsight, from that war, the most atrocious one in human history. Nor is it just that the fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War and the bipolar division of the world makes us consider what these recent developments have brought, what they mean and what tasks they set before us. More than that is needed now: we have to place all these events in their broader and deeper historical context and try to formulate the challenges of our time against the backdrop of underlying reflection.

I should like to contribute to that with a few remarks on the Czech-German relationship. I am happy to be able to do so at a site that reminds us like no other of the centuries-long intellectual coexistence of Czechs and Germans: on the academic ground of Charles University.

Our relationship to Germany and the Germans has been more than merely one of the many themes of our diplomacy. It has been a part of our destiny, even a part of our identity. Germany has been our inspiration as well as our pain; a source of understandable traumas, of many prejudices and misconceptions, but also of standards to which we turn; some regard Germany as our greatest hope, others as our greatest peril. It can be said that the Czechs define themselves, both politically and philosophically, through their attitude toward Germany and the Germans, and that the nature of this attitude determines not only their relationship to their own history but also their actual conception of themselves as a nation and a state. Obviously, the Czech-German relationship does not have the same fundamental importance for the Germans; nevertheless, it may be more important to them than some Germans might be prepared to admit: traditionally, this relationship has been one of tests that also reveal their own conception of themselves. Let us be mindful that Germany's relationship to us has at many times mirrored its relationship to Europe as a whole! At present, as the newly united Germany tries to find its new identity and its new position in Europe and the world, this relationship is all the more important.

What does this mean for us? No more and no less than that we should talk about the Czech-German theme publicly, candidly, in a matter-of-fact way and, in so doing, be fully conscious of the fact that as we speak about it, we speak about ourselves.

[. . .]

The Czech-German or German-Czech relationship acquired its dramatic, sometimes almost excruciating character only in the fairly recent past, that is, during the last two centuries, when the national dimension began to carry an increasing weight in it. This modern experience has often concealed or overshadowed the much longer experience of our earlier history, which was characterized by a special type of creative coexistence of Czechs and Germans within one state.

Of course, that coexistence wasn't always idyllic or easy, even back then, but the various confrontations that were later described as purely national ones didn't really revolve around the issue of national affiliation. Those disputes were about religion, ideas or ideologies, power, social welfare or other matters, and while factors such as where people came from, or which language they spoke, sometimes played a role as well, differing national sentiments as we understand them today were not the driving force of the confrontations back then. For centuries, the two elements, and also the Jewish element, mingled here with each other in a variety of ways, inspiring and influencing one another; we can even say that they lived together in a kind of symbiosis. Their various encounters never posed a threat to this coexistence, nor did they augur its end; on the contrary, they helped shape its history and more than once had a stimulating effect on the political and cultural accomplishments of the entire population of our country. In reality, this specific community was the actual subject of Czech history, although the Czechs always made up the majority of the country's population. For that matter, the international status of the Kingdom of Bohemia differed for a long time from the status that would be accorded to a national state today: it was always a special, influential entity within a universalistic Holy Roman Empire, and the weight of that entity was not determined by the size

of the people that formed the majority of its population but by completely different historical factors. Its multicultural character, to put it in present-day language, undoubtedly played a role among the latter; the prominent position held by the Kings of Bohemia among the Electors who chose the Emperors clearly attests to that.

The unique story of the nearly 2,000-year coexistence of Czechs and Germans in our country – although it became increasingly complicated in the last two centuries and ultimately came to an end – remains an integral part of our history, and thus also of our present identity as citizens of the Czech Republic, and is a value we must not forget. We must not forget it, among other reasons, because it is, if we allow ourselves a bit of overstatement, a very modern value that can also serve as an example as we build a new Czech-German relationship now.

[. . .]

Those who were once expelled or transferred from our country, as well as their descendants, are now welcome here, just as all Germans are welcome here. They are welcome as guests who esteem the land where generations of their forefathers once lived, who tend to sites to which they feel bound and work together with our citizens as friends. Perhaps we are no longer far removed from the day when Czechs and Germans – after they have come together in the open, border-free territory of the European Union – will be free to settle anywhere in its territory and take part in building up their chosen homeland. A good relationship between nations, and thus also our reconciliation, can only emerge from the cooperation of free citizens who resist the temptation to rally under collectivist banners and conjure up the spirits of tribal feuds in the shadows thereof.

Just as the era of apologies and of sending bills for the past should end, so too should an era of objective debate on the subject begin; it is time for monologues and isolated proclamations to give way to dialogue. Actually, dialogue has already begun among the people, local self-government bodies, historians and even politicians. I am an advocate of its constant expansion and intensification. However, it has to be a genuine dialogue. That means we have to exchange information, experience, knowledge, analyses, suggestions and programs, compare them, seek agreement and put into practice whatever good things we shall agree upon, without either of us feeling – not even by way of insinuation – like a hostage of the other, or like a hostage of our sinister history.

In other words: the era of confrontation must end once and for all, and be replaced by an era of cooperation. The more clearly the parties to such joint efforts commit themselves to the idea of a civil state and civil society, the better equipped they will be to work together. Germany is way ahead, not only economically but also because at least its Western part was able to live for years in freedom and build a liberal democratic state based on all the time-tested values of Western civilization while pursuing a truly European course; that is, it subscribed to the ideal of Europe as a political body governed by the principle of equality of large and small alike and their peaceful cooperation on the basis of equal rights and in the spirit of their shared respect for

human rights and liberties, democracy, rule of law, the market economy and the concept of civil society. In the Czech Republic, time stood still for many years, but we certainly can make up for the delay quickly, especially if we draw on the potential of our good prewar traditions, which even 57 years could not completely eradicate. Thus, the preconditions for good cooperation are there. If disturbing tones, voices or sentiments should make themselves felt, much more energy should be devoted on both sides to efforts aimed at dealing with them. On the German side, the former take the form of voices, fortunately rather rare and isolated, that try to rehabilitate the intellectual roots of the past German catastrophe, voices of secret nostalgics who are unable to part with the concept of a national state as the zenith of all human endeavor and with the feeling that Germany has been entrusted with a special mission that entitles it to a position of superiority vis-à-vis other nations. On the Czech side, we find an awkward, essentially provincial combination of fear of Germans and servility to them, and also the inability of part of our population to cast off the straitjacket of prejudices that were nurtured in our society for so long. Sometimes it seems to me as if the state of mind that characterized the immediate postwar period somehow persisted here, strangely counterbalanced by a desire to "get something out of the Germans." Thus, we can meet people who, in the spirit of Communist propaganda, frighten those around them with talk about the German threat but at the same time hang "Zimmer frei" signs on their homes and collect rent in Deutschmarks, even from Czech tenants. On the one hand, strong words marked by a nationalistic blindness and xenophobia, on the other, a total lack of elementary civic pride.

It is the same thing again: the desire to replace Communist collectivism with national collectivism, to escape one's own civic responsibility and take refuge in the anonymity of a pack that barks at all those who do not belong to it; this is one of the variations of the phenomena that we must systematically combat. The occasional signs of subconscious belief in an infallible voice of blood, of fate, of providence and of national myth, and in a right to demand the impossible, that is, the correction of a history that is perceived as a continuous series of wrongs against one's own tribe; these are other variations of the same misconception.

[. . .]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having mentioned all the various dangers lurking along the path toward an auspicious future for the Czech-German relationship, and having described those who – possibly without being aware of it – are enemies of such a future, I should like to profess my optimism.

I believe in the democratic, liberal, European Germany. I believe in the Germany of Theodor Heuss, Konrad Adenauer, Kurt Schumacher, Ludwig Erhard, Willy Brandt and Richard von Weizsäcker. I believe in the millions of German democrats. I believe in Germany's sincere desire to develop and intensify the process of European unification on the basis of the universal validity of the fundamental values of Euro-American civilization, and I believe in its readiness to work toward making Europe a continent of peace, freedom, cooperation, security and just

relations among all its states, nations and regions. Therefore I also believe in Germany's sincere readiness to support a speedy integration of Central Europe into the North Atlantic Alliance as well as into the European Union. I simply believe in Germany's preparedness to be an influential party in building an increasingly united Europe and, in this context, to put its friendly relations with Poland, the Czech Republic and other young democracies on a new footing, just as it once succeeded in reshaping its relations with France, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark.

I am not alone among my fellow citizens in holding this belief. The unequivocal support given by our state from the very beginning – unreservedly and without suspicion – to Germany's democratic reunification attests to that. Back when we were dissidents, many of us said – and our ideas often met with a lack of understanding, even among Germans – that there would be no united Europe without a united Germany, and that the Iron Curtain would never fall unless the Berlin Wall collapsed first.

I also believe in the favorable development of the democratic Czech Republic. I trust that it will speedily overcome the sad legacy of Communism and of its earlier historical traumas, too, and that it will gradually become a full-fledged and responsible member of the family of European democracies.

I trust that already during this year many things will be done to deepen the trust between our countries and peoples, to gradually eliminate the obstacles and barriers that strain our relations and to help remove all the layers of prejudices, misconceptions, illusions and suspicions we are confronted with. I trust that we shall be able to build on the solid foundations that we have laid for our coexistence since 1989, make use of the opportunities offered by the treaty between our states and develop our cooperation with a renewed vigor and at all levels.

I trust that our shared commitment to the fundamental values of civilization on which the Europe of today is being built will facilitate these endeavors and that we shall find within ourselves enough courage to stand up to all those whose political orientation draws on the calamitous past and who would wish to cross out our positive future.

I believe in the power of truth and good will as the principal sources of our mutual understanding.

Thank you for your attention.

Source of English translation (of original Czech speech): Václav Havel, "Czechs and Germans on the Way to a Good Neighborhood," Charles University Prague, February 17, 1995. http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html. Edited by GHDI staff.