

After the *Zeitenwende*: Jürgen Habermas and Germany's new identity crisis

The 92-year-old philosopher has warned Germans not to allow anger at Russia and admiration for Ukraine to displace their country's hard-won focus on dialogue and peace.

By Adam Tooze



Illustration by Barbara Gibson

Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has upended world politics and nowhere more so than in Germany. Addressing an emergency session of the Bundestag on 27 February, German chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende*, a turning point in history. Russia's attack on Ukraine meant Europe and Germany had entered a new age. But what direction is history turning in?

Scholz promised to raise Germany's defence spending and in March placed a large order for America's exorbitant F-35 fighter jets. Since then, sanctions on Russia have been tightened and Germany has even agreed to deliver heavy weapons to Ukraine. But Berlin has baulked at an all-out boycott of Russian oil and gas, and what it has to offer Kyiv militarily is limited even compared to other European nations, let alone the United States. Always there is a suspicion of delay, reluctance and fear. In Germany and

elsewhere this has been read as nothing less than a crisis of political identity. More than anywhere else in the West, the entire German intellectual class, and every TV talk show and newspaper has been mobilised to debate and criticise Germany's performance. The situation has been aggravated after Volodymyr Zelensky's attack on Germany's long-running détente with Russia in a speech to the Bundestag in March and a stream of remarkably forthright comments from Ukraine's ambassador to Berlin. You can tell matters are becoming really serious because Jürgen Habermas, the 92-year old doyen of German philosophy and political commentary, has entered the ring, for once on the side of the government.

Russia's aggression poses such fundamental questions for Germany because the nation in its current form owes its existence to the peaceful end of the Cold War that enabled reunification. The success of 1989-90 was prepared by almost two decades of Ostpolitik, in which trade and détente with the Soviet Union worked to draw back the Iron Curtain. Maintaining good relations with Moscow has always meant making a pact with the devil, first with the repressive Soviet regime in the 1970s and 1980s and then with Vladimir Putin since the 2000s. After Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020, Berlin has repeatedly shrugged and carried on. But Putin's assault on Ukraine and Ukraine's remarkable resistance have made that approach impossible.

The question is particularly explosive because in the late 1960s it was Chancellor Scholz's party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), then led by the charismatic Willy Brandt, that launched Ostpolitik. Détente runs deep in the SPD, as personified by Gerhard Schröder, ex-chancellor and unrepentant chairman of the board at Russian state oil firm Rosneft. But the attachment is not confined to the social democrats. Voices on the German right have long favoured a modus vivendi with Russia, whether under the Tsar, the Soviets or now under Putin. For them, Bismarck is the model in balancing between East and West. In 2013, the foreign policy manifesto of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) drew inspiration directly from the Iron Chancellor in arguing for a self-confident national foreign policy, but one that recognised Russia's importance for German history, back to the age of Frederick the Great, and which respected Russia's interests in the successor states to the Soviet Union. This tendency is reinforced by an undercurrent of anti-Americanism that is particularly pronounced on the far left in Die Linke. And, as has become embarrassingly clear in recent months, there is a general disregard on many sides in Berlin for the national rights of "smaller" east European states – notably Poland and Ukraine – that have the misfortune to find themselves wedged between Germany and Russia. Meanwhile, German industrial firms such as Siemens look back on 150 years of doing profitable business in Russia, relations which they are unwilling to have disrupted by a bagatelle like the annexation of Crimea.

But as German as all this may be, these factors were at work around the world after the end of the Cold War. Oil is far bigger business than the Russian gas on which Germany depends, and it was British, American and French oil majors that made the large investments in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. In diplomacy, the Gaullist tradition in France also looks to balance between Washington and Moscow. In Italy sympathy for Russia runs deep. And then there is Londongrad.

It would be fatuous also to suggest that it is only now, with Putin's invasion of Ukraine, that Ostpolitik has become contentious in Germany. Whether in Bonn or Berlin it was never simply hegemonic. At its inception in the late 1960s, the foreign policy of Willy Brandt's progressive social-liberal coalition was bitterly attacked from the right. It was always a matter of balancing. Though they looked for good working relations with Moscow, chancellors Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel were all staunch Atlanticists. Being an avowed Putin-*versteh*er ("understander") is a mark not of mainstream but fringe opinion in Germany. Die Linke and the AfD may have solid support in the former GDR, but neither is ever likely to enter national government. Tellingly, the Green party that was once regarded as a neutralist Trojan horse for German nationalism has long since converted to a foreign policy that is defined by the primacy of human rights and, on that basis, a solid alignment with "the West".

Crude stereotypes do not capture the complexity of German politics. The fact is that the problem of balancing Russia for Germany is real and that German foreign relations and German democracy are contentious, and healthily so. No one embodies that history more consistently than Jürgen Habermas.

Half a century ago Habermas emerged as the heir in West Germany to the brand of critical theory known as the Frankfurt School – named for the Institute for Social Research founded at Frankfurt University in 1929. From its roots in interwar Marxism, Habermas recentred his critical theory in the 1960s and 1970s not on labour but on communication. His lifelong preoccupation has been with the possibility of reason and emancipation that inheres in language, discourse and deliberation. Driven by this commitment to a tradition that he traces back to the Enlightenment, he distanced himself in the 1980s from radical French thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In the late 1990s he supported Nato's bombing of Kosovo. All of which earned him a reputation as an apologist for Western power.

But to infer that Habermas is a conformist figure is to deeply misunderstand his philosophy, his politics, but most of all his public role in modern Germany. For 70 years, he has been an argumentative and at times polemical force in the public life of the Federal Republic. In the 1950s and 1960s he challenged Martin Heidegger's links to Nazism and the pieties of the Cold War. In 1968 he mediated with the radical students. In 1970s he formulated a complex theory of legitimation crisis. In the 1980s he opposed nuclear rearmament and denounced the nationalist and revisionist turn in historiography, which threatened to relativise the singularity of the Holocaust. At the moment of national unification in 1990 he demanded not simply an Anschluss of East Germany but a constitutional convention. In the late 1990s his advocating, along with Joschka Fischer, that the Greens approve intervention in Kosovo in the name of the responsibility to protect was a contentious and difficult line to follow. In 2003 Habermas orchestrated a common front with Derrida against the war in Iraq. Between 2010 and 2015, after having long criticised the judicialisation of German politics under the authority of the powerful constitutional court, he denounced the technocratic drift of Eurozone policy.

This is not the track record of a conformist. In 2022, Habermas once again fears a recrudescence of the right under the mantle of enthusiasm for Ukraine's resistance. And once again his long and thoughtful article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 28 April has

been met with a storm of disapproval. As has often been the case, this outrage has been given a platform in the pages of the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. This time Habermas stands accused of defending a battered and discredited tradition of West German politics, conniving with Putin, and clinging to old nostrums about nuclear war while patronising the Ukrainians and their supporters among younger generations of Germans.

It didn't help his cause that Habermas's essay was bracketed with a misbegotten open letter that adopted what can be described as a defeatist position. The radical theorist and multimedia activist Alexander Kluge managed to tell a radio interviewer that his lesson from surrender in 1945 was that surrender was no bad thing. He neglected to mention that it was the Americans that his hometown surrendered to. Alice Schwarzer, a giant of German feminism, has insisted that Zelensky is a provocateur. The open letter they signed queried the right not only of Ukraine's government to lecture Germany on the appropriate policy, but even Zelensky's right to speak for his own people, who, the German signatories imagined, might prefer an immediate ceasefire and negotiations.

Habermas did not sign the letter. He is no pacifist. The objection to violence has its limit at the point when fundamental freedoms are at stake. Habermas concedes that weapons deliveries to Ukraine are essential. What he objects to is not the calls for more to be done, but the manner in which they are made. What worries him is "the self-assurance with which the morally indignant accusers in Germany are going after an introspective and reserved federal government".

That self-assurance betrays itself. Every right-thinking person can clearly agree that Putin's aggression must not be allowed to succeed. But we should also agree that a war with Russia is unthinkable. Russia is a nuclear power and escalation is an appalling risk. Any good-faith political intervention, Habermas insists, must squarely face this dilemma.

For the West, Habermas wrote, "having made the decision to not intervene in this conflict as a belligerent, there is a risk threshold that precludes an unrestrained commitment to the armament of Ukraine... Those who ignore this threshold and continue aggressively and self-assuredly to push the German chancellor towards it have either overlooked or not understood the dilemma into which this war has plunged the West... because the West, with its morally well-grounded decision to not become a party in this war, has tied its own hands."

In light of this dilemma, the impatience of Scholz's critics, who include not just Ukrainian spokespeople and right-wing hawks, but many former pacifists in the ranks of the Green party, is not innocent. What is being called into question, Habermas fears, is "the broad pro-dialogue, peace-keeping focus of German policy", which should never be taken for granted. It was hard won and, as Habermas notes, has "repeatedly been denounced from the right".

Those who argue that to take account of Russia's nuclear threat is to succumb to blackmail have a point. But their error is to imagine that by pointing this out they have somehow ended the argument. In fact, all they have done is to restate the problem. As Habermas notes, "Those who object to pursuing a 'policy of fear' in a rationally

justifiable manner already find themselves within the scope of argumentation of the kind that Chancellor Olaf Scholz correctly insists on – namely that of careful consideration in a politically responsible and factually comprehensive fashion.”

This mode of argument is typical of Habermas. At the same time as he offers a sharp political critique, he seeks to expose the preconditions for rational agreement. In another characteristic move he also offers an analysis of the socio-political foundations for the current confusion. The ultimate reason for the intensity of the German debate lies, according to Habermas, in the war unleashing not so much a decisive historical turn, in Scholz’s terms, but a clash of different temporalities. A clash, as Habermas puts it, between “contemporaneous but historically non-simultaneous mentalities”.

Part of the tension arises within Germany itself. As critics have alleged and Habermas readily concedes, he and his generation are indelibly shaped by the politics of the atomic age and its aftermath. This dictated an end to military history in any conventional sense.

Their children and grandchildren inherited a culture that is, if anything, even more convinced of the force of international law. And on Habermas’s reading it is precisely this normative commitment that leads them to demand that Putin be brought before the Hague. Incongruously, it is Habermas, of all people, who is forced to remind them that neither Russia nor the United States accept the authority of the international court and that demanding Putin be brought to trial as a war criminal would be tantamount to a declaration of war. For former pacifists now to make the defence of Ukraine into a just war crusade is, as Habermas puts it, not so much a turn to realism as realism turned on its head. The common denominator is a passionate commitment to normative standards in the face of harsh realities.

Then there is the enigmatic figure of Putin himself. What time does he belong to? Is he a creature of Russia’s deep history? Or, as Habermas prefers, a resentful parvenu born out of the collapse of Soviet power? Is he a genuine nuclear threat, willing to go all the way? Or is he bluffing? Part of our disorientation is precisely that we cannot decide how seriously to take him.

Finally, there is the great shock of the crisis, which is Ukraine and its remarkable resistance. As Habermas remarks: “Mixed in with our admiration of Ukraine is an element of amazement at the certainty of victory and the unbroken courage of the soldiers and recruits of all ages, grimly determined to defend their homeland from a militarily far superior enemy.”

For Habermas this too is an expression of the contemporaneity of the uncontemporaneous. Ukraine is at the stage of making a nation state, Germany is well beyond that. In checking their spontaneous reactions of enthusiasm and solidarity with Ukraine, Germans and the rest of us in the West would be well advised to consider this gap and what it implies. We thrill to the heroism of the Ukrainians, which puts into stark relief the deflated state of our own politics. But our post-heroic culture cannot simply be cast off in disgust. It is a logical historical effect of the Nato umbrella that we continue to live under. Ukraine’s desperate courage, on the other hand, is a reflection of the fact that it does not. Under those circumstances, Habermas asks, “is it not a form of pious self-

deception to bank on a Ukrainian victory against Russia's murderous form of warfare without taking up arms yourself? The bellicose rhetoric is inconsistent with the bleachers from which it is delivered."

This distance between established nation states and the nation-state-to-be has implications for both sides. It ill-behoves us to cheer for more blood from the safety of the stands. But Ukraine also needs to consider its diplomatic tactics.

Habermas has been accused of suggesting that Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukraine's information warriors are manipulating us through their slick media op and engaging in moral blackmail, which of course they are. Nor is there any shame in that. Kyiv is fighting the information war with the same determination and skill it is showing on other fronts. It is doing exactly what it must do. Habermas's point is more subtle.

Ukraine plays on Germans' guilt at their own passivity. But Germany's own position is warranted by its history. As Habermas remarks: "Allies should not reproach each other for different political mentalities that historically do not match in view of being still involved in the becoming of a nation state or having passed that kind of formation process."

Ukraine and Germany have to learn to interact across this developmental divide. This will require tact, insight and diplomacy. As Habermas remarks: "... such differences should be accepted as fact and cleverly accounted for in cooperation. But as long as these perspective-defining differences remain in the background, they only result in emotional confusion."

This was visible in the reaction to Zelensky's shocking speech to the Bundestag, in which he dismissed Germany's attention to the memory of the Holocaust as worthless lip service. Though the government and the Bundestag gave no time to discussion of the speech, the public at large reacted, according to Habermas, with a confused mixture of "raw intimations of approval" and spontaneous identification with Zelensky's position, and at the same time a defensive assertion of self-respect.

Zelensky's was a blunt assault, which with its "neglect of historically founded differences in the perception and interpretation of war doesn't just lead to significant mistakes in dealing with each other. Even worse, they lead to a reciprocal misunderstanding of what the other actually thinks and wants."

What Habermas is warning his fellow Germans against is the mirage that by way of Ukraine there is some road back to the future. The post-heroic attitude is a historically appropriate reaction to the history of Europe since the end of the Second World War and the Cold War. Seeking to close the emotional and cultural gap to Ukraine amid the continued reality of the nuclear stand-off is both unrealistic and dangerous. The challenge we have to collectively face is how to offer genuine support while recognising distance. One might say that Habermas is urging us to figure out the politics of allyship on the international stage and under the shadow of the nuclear threat.

What is clear is that we must find a constructive way out of the dilemma posed by the war, a way out that must, as Habermas says in his final line, be defined by one basic

aspiration: "Ukraine 'must not lose' this war." Its project of building a nation state must continue.

For Europe itself the task is different. What the contrast with Ukraine ought to reveal is not so much the lack of a properly heroic national identity, but the lack of post-national capacities at the EU level. As Habermas remarks, there is a reason why those who have declared a historic turning point are those who have for a long time argued that Europe must be able to stand on its own feet militarily if it wants to ensure that its "social and political way of life" is not destabilised from without or hollowed out from within. That would not answer Ukraine's heroism in kind but it would at least allow Europe to decide on its policy independently both of the US and Russia. Right now, American politicians are falling over themselves to provide tens of billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine in its fight with Russia. That they can agree on that and not on healthcare or climate change policy is a sign of America's own dysfunction. But what US politics will bring in the near future is anyone's guess. Soon Europe may be facing a disorientating clash of historical temporalities and political time not in eastern Europe but across the Atlantic. As Habermas reminds us, Macron's re-election opens another window of opportunity. Will Europe seize it?