Poland's Anti-German Lurch
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Berlin

Outside observers may regard today's tension between Warsaw and Berlin as no more than an all-too-predictable reversion to historical habit. But participants in the striking bilateral reconciliation of the early 1990s—both Germans and Poles—view the strains instead as a sad detour from Poland's calling as a modern European state. They see Warsaw's current prickly chauvinism as a particularly acute form of today's vertigo throughout Central Europe as the new democracies there try to effect in one generation the political, economic, and social revolutions it took Western Europe took two centuries to master.

As the cold war petered out a decade and a half ago, Poland and Germany patterned their swift rapprochement on the classic French-German reconciliation of the 1960s, ended the most poisonous residue of national hostility left from World War II, and (re)united a Europe that had been divided for a half century by the iron curtain. Poles, no longer squeezed between more powerful and expansionist Germans and Russians, relaxed their sense of being the crucified Christ of nations and stopped nursing memories of brutal Nazi and Soviet occupation and of Poland's 19th-century partition between Germany, Russia, and Austria. Germans, chastened by recognition of the horror their grandparents had wrought, no longer held the Slavs in contempt.

Nor was the post-cold war drive just a project of deracinated elites. At the time, young Poles were as likely as young Swedes to wear Bundeswehr jackets they had bought on modish King's Road. Surprisingly, surveys suggested that ordinary Poles were much more comfortable with German reunification in 1990 than British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was. They assumed that the West Germans they had come to respect far more than their supposed East German allies—especially after East Germans parroted Soviet condemnation of the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s, while tens of thousands of West Germans spontaneously donated food and clothing to needy Polish workers when their trade union was suppressed—would set the tone for the new Germany.

Indeed, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl defended the Poles even against an important constituency of his own conservative party—the more than 10 million Germans who had been brutally expelled from territories that became Polish as the World War II victors shifted both the Soviet/Polish and Polish/German boundaries west. These expellees and their heirs seized the post-cold war opening to demand compensation from Warsaw for property confiscated by the old Communist Polish government back in the 1940s, but Kohl declined to back their claims. The refugees had been compensated in surrogate by the first West German government in the early 1950s, German diplomats argued, and had anyway prospered in the subsequent West German economic miracle, while the Poles had suffered five decades of deprivation. Bonn's refusal to champion the expellees' demands was balanced by German refusal to pay any additional reparations to the new Polish democrats for Nazi occupation beyond the millions paid to Polish Communist governments in the 1970s and 1980s to buy exit visas for remaining ethnic Germans in Poland to emigrate to West Germany if they wished.

Within the European Union, Kohl also made Germany the conspicuous patron of the Poles and other newly democratic Central Europeans. He joined Britain in lobbying hard for their accession to the EU against the resistance of most other EU members. He founded the regular high-level "Weimar triangle" talks as a way to bring Poland into a collegial dialogue

with a reluctant France (which feared Poland would become an American Trojan horse in the EU). A retired Bundeswehr general was named adviser to the Polish armed forces to help them navigate their way as they joined the NATO alliance. Later, in the EU's chaotic Nice Treaty of 2000 it was Kohl's successor, Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder, who insisted that Poland get as many weighted votes as the equally populous Spain when it joined the club in 2004.

Schröder did richochet from his clash with President George W. Bush over the Iraq war to embrace Russian President Vladimir Putin, finance a Baltic Sea gas pipeline that would conspicuously bypass Poland, and accept on his retirement from politics an unseemly position as a head of the pipeline consortium. In a riposte, Polish Defense Minister Radek Sikorski branded this a repetition of the Hitler-Stalin pact that carved up Poland on the eve of World War II. Schröder's conservative successor, Angela Merkel, however, restored Berlin's priority on Poland, visited Warsaw within ten days of becoming chancellor, and resumed German protection of Poland against Russian (and French) pressures. Germans generally, in enlightened self-interest, gave bipartisan support to integrating Poland into the Western community as fast as possible so that their own country would cease to be the cold-war frontline and for the first time in its history would be surrounded by friends.

The leadership of the newly democratic Poland responded in kind. Member of Parliament and medieval scholar Bronislaw Geremek hailed the natural coming together of east and west in the early 1990s and only regretted that this friendship had not been sealed a thousand years earlier when the Holy Roman Empire's Otto III met Poland's Boleslaw the Brave. Polish Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski saw the chain reaction of post-World War II reconciliation as evidence of "the capacity of people to change" in the face of the 20th century's terrible wars. A succession of fluent German-speaking Polish ambassadors through Andrzej Byrt in 2006 distinguished themselves in the diplomatic community in Bonn and Berlin.

To be sure, there were early Polish dissenters from this dominant political narrative. The influential Roman Catholic hierarchy suspected the EU of being a Protestant club that would subvert Polish family values (much as Protestant politicians in Western Europe had suspected the European Community of being a Catholic conspiracy back in the 1960s). It took the discreet dialogue of German bishops with their Polish counterparts, and some constraint by Pope John Paul II of Catholic firebrands in his homeland, to override the suspicion. And the popular and strident Radio Marija, defying reprimands by the Polish primate himself, never did stop its anti-German, anti-West harangues.

Politically, the nativist defense of Poland against inundation by Germany and a secular Europe took the form of several small populist parties— the fiercely Catholic League of Polish Families, the militant peasant Self-Defense movement led by Andrzej Lepper, and the more moderate Law and Justice party (PiS) of the Kaczynski twins, Jaroslaw and Lech. These remained fringe parties as long as the main electoral contests pitted Solidarity's democratic centrist offshoots against the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), or "post-Communists." But after the former splintered, the latter governed for a tumultuous decade and thereafter reaped negative protest votes against corruption and painful reforms—and after popular disgust with politics halved election turnout—the Law and Justice Party became the main challenger to the SLD. In fall 2005, a year after Poland's triumphal accession to the EU, the PiS won a plurality of 27 percent on a turnout of 40 percent and a campaign that anticipated coalition with the more mainstream and pro-West Solidarity offshoot of Civic Platform, the runner-up at 24 percent.

When the two center-right parties could not agree on ministerial and parliamentary posts, however, the Law and Justice Party eventually formed a coalition instead with the League of Polish Families (8 percent) and Self-Defense (11 percent, on a par with the shrunken SLD). Lech Kaczynski was elected president in a separate vote, and the PiS's real leader, Jaroslav, after first operating for close to a year as the eminence grise, formally became prime minister in July 2006. Radio Marija was a major cheerleder of the swing to the right.

In office, the coalition's three parties reinforced each other's anti-EU and anti-German reflexes, and also their common hostility toward former Polish Communists who had changed their coats and prospered in the new democratic Poland. Instead of downplaying the ongoing property claims on Poland by the Association of German Expellees and pragmatically accepting the Berlin government's disavowal of these claims as the SLD government had done, the nationalist Polish government insisted on a very public bilateral treaty that would legally ban filing of any private claims in German courts. Instead of deflecting efforts by the expellees' association to found a museum portraying the suffering of grandparents who had been ethnically cleansed from Poland to propose a less inflammatory museum memorializing all of Europe's tragic ethnic cleansings—as German politicians were trying to do—the Polish government simply denounced the expellees. For good measure, the government also demanded German reparations to Poland for World War II damages above the ransom paid to Warsaw for ethnic Germans in the 1970s and 1980s.

Moreover, the Kaczynski government disciplined Polish diplomats who were deemed insufficiently nationalist. The foreign ministry was purged; Ambassador Byrt was withdrawn from Berlin. And Jaroslaw Kaczynski not only did not reciprocate Chancellor Merkel's swift trip to Warsaw, but put off his first-ever visit to Berlin until three demonstrative months after he became prime minister.

By then President Lech Kaczynski had abruptly pulled out of the next scheduled Weimar Triangle summit after Berlin's countercultural *Tageszeitung* satirically portrayed the rotund twins as "potatoes." He demanded in vain that the German government apologize for the newspaper's insult, and diplomats' explanation that the German government did not control the press failed to calm him. Ambassador Byrt, already in the doghouse with his new superiors, compounded his offense by acknowledging to journalists that there might be "over-sensitivity" among new Polish politicians who "hardly know foreign countries." For his part, Jaroslaw Kaczynski tried to show how to manage domestic media by forbidding Polish photographers to take profile shots of him. This rule was rescinded only after press photographers grumbled that the reason for the proscription was to avoid accentuating the prime minister's double chin.

Within the EU, instead of adapting to the club's unique give-and-take rolling consensus as the SLD governments had done, the PiS government asserted maximalist positions and threatened to use its member's veto whenever it failed to achieve them. Polish peasants were pleasantly surprised when EU membership brought them farm support from Brussels, but still they gave votes to the anti-EU Self-Defense movement. And after France and Holland rejected the draft EU constitution in referenda in 2005, Warsaw threatened to veto any renegotiated draft unless it retained the greater voting weight Berlin had won for Warsaw in the Nice Treaty that became the fallback framework for EU governance. This selective approach risked untying the whole package of complex deals required to secure consensus on the original constitutional text.

Part of the calculation in Warsaw's assertiveness seemed to involve the expectation that the US, as its distant patron, would back Poland against Brussels as a reward for having sent troops to join the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 when Germany and France refused to do so. Indeed, to increase his leverage, Prime Minister Kaczynski pointedly flew to Washington just before making his maiden visit to Berlin at the end of October 2006. To his disappointment, however, George W. Bush did not have time to meet him, let alone display the cordiality the American president had lavished on Poland's (ex-Communist) President Alexander Kwasniewski, a man who had quickly adapted to Western diplomatic niceties. Kwasniewski's prize earlier payoff was both American and EU support at a critical point for the democratic Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine in late 2004. As security in Iraq and the broader Middle East deteriorated in 2006, however, and Bush needed all the help he could get from the big European players to extricate the US from the quagmire, he was in no mood to encourage the twins' tweaking of the EU's, and Germany's, tails. Not even President Kaczynski's out-of-the-blue proposal that the EU raise an army of 100,000, apparently as strategic reserves for the US and NATO to draw on at will in worldwide interventions, drew American praise.

It was therefore a slightly deflated Prime Minister Kaczynski who arrived in Berlin on October 30 and took away little political reward. He got an impressive four hours of talks with Merkel, but he got no promises beyond Merkel's already mooted policy of drawing all of Europe, including Poland, into guaranteed use of the Russian pipeline's forthcoming gas. The atmosphere was not yet right for Germans to broach the vision some of them were starting to form of a more unified EU foreign policy and eventually even intelligence network based on the big five of the old EU—Germany, France, Britain, Italy, and Spain—along with newcomers Sweden and Poland.

Nonetheless, it's worth noting that a few stubborn German and Polish visionaries still dare to hope, sotto voce, that today's reversion to historical Polish-German (and concomitant Polish-EU) antagonism is only temporary and that the extraordinary collegiality of the 1990s is the real wave of the future.