

The New Germany:

How Lessons From History Influence German Policies on the Wars in Ukraine and the Middle East

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Lecture Summary: Aarnav Sheth

“The New Germany,” a lecture given by George Washington University Professor Hope Harrison provided great insight into Germany’s historic policies regarding Russia and the Middle East, and how those policies have developed and changed over time as they pertain to the ongoing wars in each region. As a distinguished expert on 20th Century European geopolitics, Hope Harrison brought unparalleled experience from her numerous publications and media appearances regarding Germany’s political history.

Her proficiency in the subject was greatly evident throughout the lecture as she delved into two shocks that Germany has faced in recent times: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the impact of the Hamas-Israeli war on Germany.

Contextualizing the first shock with a discussion of Germany’s history with Russia, Dr. Harrison discussed the impact of Germany’s battles with the Soviet Union during World War II. After the division of Germany, stark differences in the alliances of East and West Germany became apparent. Soviet-occupied East Germany was a huge proponent of communism while West Germany was strongly anti-communist.

I was able to see this division in the Germany House of History, where the museum was initially divided into East and West sections in an effort to portray the vastly different policies of the two countries. Despite ideological turmoil, West Germany eventually began to sign treaties with the Soviet Union in an effort to “reach across the Iron Curtain” and undergo change through rapprochement.

After Germany reunified, it began to develop a dependence on Russian energy. This dependence continued through the early 21st Century and came into question as Germany supported Russian natural gas companies with its plans to create Nord Stream 2, a natural gas pipeline that would further increase German dependence on Russia. However, after the surprise Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the project was put on hold and German foreign policy changed drastically.

Chancellor Scholz implemented five courses of action to stop Russia and help Ukraine, but the people of Germany remained divided by historic differences. The people of the Eastern regions of Germany tended to trust Russia and blame NATO for the conflict at hand. In contrast, the people of the Western regions of Germany wanted to support Ukraine with aid and weapons. The first shock, the Russian invasion on Ukraine, resulted in a split among old political affiliations in Germany.

The second shock to the German people was the impact of the Hamas-Israeli war on Germany. Stemming from developments from the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, many German officials have been shocked by the rise in anti-Semitism within their country. Following the second world war, numerous laws had been put into place in Germany to educate the public about the history of the Holocaust and prevent the spread of misinformation about German history. During my time in Germany, I saw the impact of these laws in action as my host brother and his grade had to make a compulsory trip to a concentration camp to learn about Germany's history. I believe this particular law was in effect only in Bavaria, but its impact was apparent on my peers at school. The impact of similar laws targeting the general population has been a great decrease in anti-Semitism since the early 20th Century and a slow rise in the Jewish population in Germany.

As such, the recent rise in anti-Semitism has been particularly surprising to much of the German public. Not only is anti-Semitism on the rise in Germany, but Islamophobia is, also. Following the recent influx of Muslim refugees to Germany, anti-immigrant sentiment of all kinds has been a growing concern. In Passau, I attended a workshop on the German refugee situation, and I learned just how difficult life was for Muslim immigrants. Many Muslim immigrants faced discrimination in obtaining jobs, having social lives, and even in everyday activities. As a result of Germany's second shock, the impact of war in the Middle East, Germany remains more divided than ever with many Germans objecting to the country's approach to the conflict.