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## The Return of the German Flag

By Jill Winder

JULY 15, 2006

BERLIN—When I first moved to Berlin in July 2002, the FIFA World Cup championship was in progress. I'm not a sports fan, and as an average American I was basically unaware of how important soccer (in European parlance, football) was in Europe and the rest of the world. My friends tried to convince me how much fun it would be to watch matches in local bars, where serious fans downed pint after pint of German beer and stared intently at the large TV screens erected for the occasion. Although it was entertaining (and interesting) to see how seriously people took football, I did not discover a latent love of the sport, as some German friends had hoped.

It must have been my first or second week in Germany, and my friends took me to a bar to watch a World Cup match, South Korea vs. Turkey. The Turkish national team was competing for the first time since 1954 and had been doing well (they ended up finishing in 3<sup>rd</sup> place). I was living in Kreuzberg, a neighborhood with a significant Turkish immigrant population, and the Turkish fans were loud, proud and thrilled with their team's progress. Turkish flags were everywhere—flying from cars, hanging off balconies and displayed in shop windows.

The German team, meanwhile, advanced to the final, ultimately losing the title to Brazil. Again, I walked through Kreuzberg with my friends, heading to a bar to watch the game. Turkish flags were still everywhere. Our little group turned a corner and saw a German flag hanging from a balcony. My three friends stopped in their tracks and stared at it. Their discomfort was palpable, yet no one said anything and we proceeded to the bar. I remember finding it odd, and later I asked my friend and roommate Tina Holmes what the matter was. Although I was aware of German history and why German nationalism was a difficult, even volatile subject, I was surprised at what seemed a taboo against a citizen flying the flag. "The Turks have their flag on everything in the neighborhood—why did seeing one German flag make you guys so uncomfortable?" I asked Tina, "It's just because of a football game." She looked at me and said simply and matter-of-factly, "We don't fly flags. It's just not done. The only people I've seen walking around with German flags in the last ten years are neo-Nazis." And she was right—over the course of the next four years living in Berlin, the only place I ever remember seeing a German flag was on official government buildings, and one time during a neo-Nazi rally in Leipzig.

\* \* \*

Flash forward to 2006. Germany hosted this year's World Cup and the country had been preparing for months before June, when the competition began. The official slogan of the World Cup in Germany was the optimistic (if cheesy) phrase, "A Time to Make Friends." The German government saw the World Cup as a great opportunity to dispel widespread (and generally unfair) stereotypes about Germans—that they are a humorless, beer drinking, lederhosen-wearing people, weighed down by history, dour, bureaucratic and obsessed with order. The government, tourism bureau and major companies launched massive public relations campaigns aimed at preparing German citizens for the influx of foreign visitors. Employees even took courses instructing them on how to smile and



*Berlin's TV Tower decorated by World Cup sponsor Deutsche Telekom with colored panels to make it look like a soccer ball. Photo: Tina Holmes*

provide a kind of "American-style" customer service: friendly, attentive and quick. Nevertheless, the opening ceremony of the World Cup, held in Munich in early June, was, I'm told, a parade of cliché and kitsch (people in Bavarian costume, beer steins, goofy traditional music). The country wanted to provide the world with the new face of Germany, but the opening ceremony proved that even the Germans themselves found this difficult.

I was in the US for the duration of the World Cup championship, and arrived back in Berlin on the day of the final match between France and Italy. I had gotten together with friends to watch football in New York, and even started to enjoy myself. The infectious energy was hard to ignore, especially because the young German national team was doing so well (they finished in 3<sup>rd</sup> place). I wondered how Berlin, buzzing with excitement and filled with visitors, was changing in my absence. I had heard reports from friends in Germany, and every e-mail I received mentioned the German flag and its return to the public sphere. Tina wrote to say that flags were everywhere, sounding both surprised and pleased. So while I was aware of how much things had changed in six weeks, it was still striking to see how many German flags were on display as I rode into the city center in a taxi from the airport on the morning of the final, July 9. The sudden, dramatic increase in Germans proudly displaying the flag became the topic of the day in both the national and international media. In the *feuilleton* sec-

tion of left-leaning newspapers, intellectuals decried this "resurgence of national symbolism" and went so far as to lament that Germans "have not learned from their history." Other publications quoted politicians, such as German President Horst Köhler, saying that the return of the flag and the general good cheer that Germans felt during the World Cup were positive signs of further "normalization" in the country. "The Germans are identifying themselves with their country and its national colors. I think that's great. And I think it's great that I'm not the only one with a flag on my car," Köhler said in an interview in *Der Spiegel*. Germany's most popular tabloid, the *Bild*, took things a step further, with a headline that christened the tri-color flag, *Schwarz, rot, geil* or "black, red and horny." So what does it mean? Is the flag a dark icon of Germany's past, a positive symbol of the "new" Germany, or the latest must-have accessory?

As I reflected on these questions while still in New York, I thought about my own relationship with the American flag, and the difference between the ritual gesture of flying a flag and the meaning or symbolism behind it. I venture to guess that like many Americans of my generation, the true meaning of the flag, and the rights and freedoms that it represents, were rather abstract for a large part of my youth. Sure, I put my hand over my heart in front of the flag to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in school, and saw plenty of flags gracing



*A German flag decorates an otherwise drab eastern Berlin building. Note the flags of Berlin and East Germany hanging in the windows (below the German flag, to the left). Photo: Tara McDowell.*



*View of the imposing and impressive Olympia Stadium in Berlin, where many World Cup matches, including the final, took place. Photo: Tina Holmes*



*At the "Fan Fest Berlin" near the Brandenburg Gate, hundreds of (ticketless) German fans congregate for some entertainment and the chance to watch a match on Jumbotron screens set up outdoors. They proudly wave a sea of German flags. Photo: Tina Holmes*

the lawns in our suburban Utah neighborhood on the Fourth of July or Memorial Day. And I remember a special dessert one aunt would make for our family's annual Fourth of July barbecue: a fluffy white sheet cake with a layer of strawberries and cream inside, frosted and decorated with cream and berries to resemble an American flag.

But to me the appearance of the flag was part of a ritual, one from which the symbolism of the flag was basically absent. The first time in my life when I felt truly patriotic, moved and proud to see a flag flown, was in New York after the attacks on September 11, 2001. It was the first time I felt that the display of the flag was more than a ritual gesture emptied of meaning by habit or holiday etiquette, but was flown to communicate everything from pride and solidarity to commitment to the freedoms the flag represents.

The majority of Germans, I'm sure, flew the flag and donned its colors as a ritual gesture, or perhaps just because they were excited about a football team. For the older generation of Germans (say, those born in the early postwar years), it is probably a relief to see the German flag flown because of a sporting event. This represents an enormous change in German attitudes. Until recently, only conservatives or right-wing extremists dared to use the flag as a national symbol, and they did so as a conscious political act. Even in 1990, when nearly a million people gathered in Berlin to celebrate the one-year anniversary of German reunification, only a scattered group of skinheads and neo-Nazis were holding German flags.

This summer the flag made its reappearance as the de facto mascot of the German national football team, unmoored from its traditional use as a symbol of national identity and even nationalism. And for the younger generation, many of whom resent that Germany is not

allowed (or does not allow itself) to leave history in the past, the return of the German flag was seen as something utterly normal and uncontroversial: a long-overdue display that allows them to finally be proud of their country. Even Gregor Gysi, the charismatic intellectual leader of the PDS, the successor party to East Germany's former communist party, and no friend of the German flag, admitted that these youth represent, "a new generation that, when it comes to the German nation, is not as handicapped as my generation."

Or is it even more devoid of meaning than that? As Michael Sontheimer wrote on June 29<sup>th</sup> in *Der Spiegel*: "Germany is awash in a sea of black, red and gold flags. But this shouldn't be confused with any kind of deep-seated patriotism. For German youth, the German flag has become the ultimate party accessory during the World Cup." It may sound cynical, but my sense is that the degree of seriousness with which

young people in Germany displayed the national colors has an inverse relationship to the amount of kitschy consumer goods produced bearing black, red, and gold. Official German flags waved from car antennae and hung from balconies. Stores ran out of flags across the country, and German flag merchants and factories were unable to keep up with the unprecedented demand. One could also purchase small plastic flags, tri-color visors, armbands, pins, plastic leis, commemorative cups, scarves, hats, fake eyelashes, wigs and bikinis and other memorabilia.

When I asked my friends what they thought about the return of the flag, not one of them mentioned politics. They thought that the World Cup and the German team's success had given a big boost to the country, an opportunity for Germans to get behind something that had no ideological or political pitfalls. And they mentioned acting "normal" more than once. "All the other countries on the planet can fly their flag and it's high time Germans are 'allowed' to do the same," said my friend Karen. "And that's all it is... the team's doing well



*A proud fan covers herself with the colors of the German flag (with face paint, a hat, a lei, an armband, and hair accessory). Photo: Tina Holmes*

and we're proud of them. I'm also proud to be German but I wouldn't need to fly a flag to prove it."<sup>1</sup> My friend Tina, who had reacted with displeasure at seeing a single German flag in the neighborhood during the previous World Cup, was also happy to see the change. Her boyfriend Uli is a huge football fan, and they watched nearly every match during the tournament. When she showed me some pictures when I returned to Berlin, I was amused to see that she sported a tri-color sun visor when she watched the games.

If there was a striking political dimension to flag flying during the World Cup, it could be found in an unlikely place—immigrant communities. Turks and other immigrants whose national teams did not qualify for the tournament started adopting Germany's national symbol as the World Cup progressed and the German national team performed well. German flags flew in the store windows of Turkish-owned businesses in Berlin-Kreuzberg, a stunning turn when compared to the 2002 World Cup. This is a significant gesture when debates about immigration and integration in the country are highly charged. As journalist Marc Young wrote, "And Germans aren't the only ones. The black, red and gold flag fest has been a boon for the country's integration of its citizens with immigrant backgrounds. Many Turks and Arabs flew the German colors at their shops or on their cars. A small gesture perhaps, but an important one to both those Germans concerned about integration and those immigrants acknowledging that this is their home too."

In the end, the public relations campaigns financed by government and business seemed to pay off. Reports on Germany's hospitality and services were overwhelmingly positive. There were no terrorist incidents, and, much to the government's relief, neo-Nazi elements did not disrupt the festivities or attack foreign visitors. But the real winners in the World Cup were the Germans themselves. As the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* said in a headline near the end of the World Cup, "Germany falls in love with Germany." The economy is finally looking up, many Germans think that Chancellor Angela Merkel is doing a good job, and, as the situation in Iraq deteriorates further, Germans are proud that former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder stood up to Bush in refusing to support the invasion—a political decision now widely seen as prescient and unquestionably correct. Germany still has many challenges to face, not least the shockingly high number of jobless citizens, especially in the for-



*A small boy attends a rally in support of the German football team, leaving no question as to which side he's rooting for. Photo: Tina Holmes*

*My friends Uli and Karen dressed up in German-centric gear in preparation for a football match. Uli is wearing an "official" German team jersey and Karen is putting on a plastic lei with the colors of the German flag. Photo: Tina Holmes*



mer East, but the World Cup presented an opportunity to cast a hopeful eye to the future and to celebrate the achievements of the country, especially since 1989. As Marc Young wrote, "The growing pains of a reunited Germany shouldn't overshadow the positive and instructive lesson the World Cup has taught us: namely that, in the New Germany, waving the black, red and gold flag in no way suggests any kind of return to a troublesome past."

I think only time will tell if this ritual gesture had a symbolic dimension for the Germans who waved their flag. And if it did, and the World Cup provided a way for German citizens to celebrate their country, I think that is a development to be celebrated rather than feared. □

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of reading the media reports about the German flag's reappearance during the World Cup, I came across one intriguing detail: Apparently the van ferrying the American national team around the country was the only team van whose exterior was not boldly painted with national colors. This may be explained as a security precaution, but it is probably also a reaction to the rampant anti-Americanism currently found in most of the world.