

# The Prussian Spirit vs. Western Democracy: the controversial image of post-war Germany in american historiography

Espírito prussiano vs. Democracia ocidental: a imagem controversa da Alemanha do pós-guerra na historiografia norte-americana

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**Resumo** Este artigo analisa a influência do conceito de “Espírito prussiano” no pensamento político norte-americano voltado para a Alemanha no pós-guerra, bem como analisa a presença da “questão germânica” na historiografia norte-americana desde a Segunda Grande Guerra. A relação entre o “Espírito prussiano” tradicional e a recém-fundada democracia de tipo ocidental na Alemanha do pós-guerra atraiu especial atenção acadêmica. A resposta para essa questão poderia permitir, em grande medida, antever o sucesso ou a derrota de toda política externa e estratégia dos Estados Unidos perante a Europa. A partir de uma vasta gama de fontes, vários autores demonstraram que acadêmicos norte-americanos estiveram amplamente interessados nesse assunto durante os momentos em que o status da Alemanha foi revisto pela comunidade internacional. **Palavras-chave** Historiografia norte-americana, Questão Alemã, Alemanha Ocidental, Espírito Prussiano, Democracia Ocidental, Alemanha Unificada, Geopolítica.

**Abstract** The article analyses the influence of the “Prussian spirit” concept on the postwar American political thinking towards Germany. It also focuses on the analysis of the “German problem” in American historiography since World War II. The relationship between the traditional “Prussian spirit” and the newly formed Western democracy in post-war Germany attracted special attention of researchers. The answer to that question could, to a great extent, forecast the success or the failure of the whole American foreign policy and strategy in Europe. Based on a wide range of sources, many authors have shown that American scholars were highly interested in that issue at certain periods when Germany’s status was being revised by the international community. **Keywords** American historiography, German question, West Germany, Prussian spirit, Western democracy, united Germany, geopolitics.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of the Prussian spirit in the literature of various genres – scientific, popular science, journalistic, artistic – is traditionally associated with Germany and/or the German national character. Its history goes back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century when Germanic tribes invaded the Apennine Peninsula. Since that time the Prussian spirit started to be associated with bellicosity, aggressive foreign policy and determination to establish control and domination. The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has twice demonstrated the supposedly “crushing power” of the Prussian spirit, and objectively had contributed to the special attention of American historians in the post-war period. Researchers noticed the revival of the Prussian spirit mainly when the Germans felt their own weakness or the loss of rights in comparison to other European states. So, the involvement of Germany into World War I happened, among other things, because of the desire to expand the influence area to overseas territories. Similarly, the difficult and humiliating conditions of the Versailles Treaty together with the Great Depression, led Germany to Hitlerism and contributed to the outbreak of World War II. After 1945, the Americans decided to take a completely different approach in dealing with the defeated countries. They bet on the creation of a democratic and economically prosperous German society, while not forgetting to retain overall control over the military-industrial complex of the newborn democracy. That strategy had given the fruits by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this article, on the one hand, we will discuss a set of propositions and hypotheses about the influence of what is believed to be the Prussian spirit on post-war Germany; and on the other hand, a certain attention will be paid to the American authors’ analytical conclusions and practical recommendations for promoting the Western democratic model in the post-war German state.

Analyzing the notion of the Prussian spirit in post-war historiography, it should be mentioned that the German question after World War II was a complex and multi-level problem of international relations. It included a whole range of sub-issues related to the Cold War (for example, the status of Berlin in the late 1960s – early 1970s, the post-war borders of Germany, or the prospects of a future German unification). While working with primary sources, it was possible to establish that the manifestation of the Prussian spirit issue in the works of American researchers followed a certain pattern. It became relevant when the German problem got actualized at a specific time interval. Since World War II there was a certain number of considerable shifts in the German problem. Every new initiative implied some revision of Germany status, the revival of its potential and its return to the spectrum of the Great Powers. For many years, European countries, at first Britain and France, believed that Germany would be harmless only if it remains weak. But the Versailles Treaty proved the fallacy of that assumption. Americans did not have such strong historical stereotypes about European countries and believed in the effectiveness of social welfare combined with external military control. But in a certain period of time when the future of the German state was at stake, the traditional discussion about the German nature was revived. American scholars concentrated on the same questions: is post-war Germany a reliable, genuine democratic state? Or the Prussian spirit is still alive and just waiting for the right time to show its power?

## WEST GERMANY-1949: NEW COUNTRY WITH OLD TRADITIONS

The first reflections on the Prussian spirit were found on the pages of American publications in the second half of the 1940s. At that period the fate of the post-war economic and political structure of Germany was being decided. Social tension grew in the German territories ravaged by the war and the post-war crisis, while the contradictions between the Great Powers in the matter of German settlement deepened. American scholars paid attention to the fact that *“the German consciousness is sick”*, without accepting the fact they found it impossible to understand Hitlerism (HILL, 1947, p. 231). According to survey results, only 6% of Germans in the post-war years admitted that they felt compassion for the victims of the occupation. American researchers related this fact to the peculiarities of the German national character. During the occupation period, Germans understood themselves as victims and therefore did not show active empathy towards the victims of the former Reich’s expansionism. There were fears among Americans that the Prussian spirit of the Germans might be put at the service of Soviet interests. According to Drew Middleton, the Western allies had to constantly remember the fundamental importance of Germany in the struggle for Europe. In no way should the USSR be allowed to use the *“old authoritarian instincts of the Germans”* to transform Germany into a communist state (MIDDLETON, 1949, p. 296).

In the second half of the 1940s American researchers acknowledged the failures of the denazification policy and the return to political life of people who collaborated with the Nazi regime. In 1945, Henry Morgenthau, Head of the US Treasury, published a book called *“Germany is our Problem”*. In that publication, the author paid attention to the analysis of the *“Prussian paranoia”* phenomenon, which supposedly led the Germans to unleash two World Wars within half a century. From the author’s point of view, the primary task of the allies in Germany should have been the decentralization of its economy, in particular, the elimination of heavy industry. That would make it possible to eliminate the very possibility of a new aggression. The author considered the complete elimination of the Nazis from economic management as an important prerequisite for the formation of a new Germany. Only after the completion of that process Morgenthau considered it possible to undertake a large-scale retraining program for Germans, although he considered its prospects doubtful. According to the author, history did not contain examples of *“civilized people”* being reeducated by a different *“civilized people”* (MORGENTHAU, 1945, p. 153). However, since 1947, the position of the State Department has clearly predominated in US political thinking, which prioritized the task of economic rehabilitation, not punishment of the Nazis. Allen Dulles in his article *“Alternatives for Germany”* (1947) noted that the most important condition for the formation of democracy is not only the victory over Nazism, but also overcoming unfavorable socio-economic conditions. Democracy could not be created in a society dominated by hunger and hopelessness. At the same time, the author agreed with the followers of the Morgenthau line that there were historically justified concerns about the possible transformation of the German hope for a better future into the hope of creating a new Great Reich (DULLES, 1947, p. 430).

Since 1948 massive failure of the program became clear. In specialized publications, a new term appears to denote the unsatisfactory results of denazification – “renazification”. It was accompanied by the return of “denazified” Nazis to high positions in political, economic and other structures. American scholars came to the conclusion that the denazification was reduced only to the temporary removal of Nazis from important posts, but did not ensure their long-term removal from the levers of influence. The formation of a bipolar world and the growing rivalry between the USA and the USSR highly contributed to that. Most American researchers of the first post-war decade expressed concerns about the possible strengthening of neo-Nazism in Germany and its return to the foreign policy tactics of balancing East and West. They considered the Bonn Republic as an unnatural, unregenerate and unreliable political creature (HERZ, 1948; GRIFFITH, 1950).

The emergence of the West German state in 1949 additionally actualized the issue of its political culture and the Prussian spirit’s influence on the minds of both the ruling elite and millions of citizens. Since the 1950s, American researchers were gradually coming to a consensus: the Bonn republic could become a successful Western democracy. They identified two circumstances that contributed to the neutralization of the Prussian spirit in a new German state:

1) The exclusion of the old Prussia, which formed the core of East Germany.

The theory of Prussian spirit was very popular during World War II. It largely inspired H. Morgenthau and his supporters to develop plans for post-war Germany. The head of the US Treasury himself openly expressed doubts about the existence of an objective opportunity to foster the German’s affection for democracy. Followers of the theory believed that the separation of warlike Prussia from the peace-loving Rhineland and Bavaria would help to solve the problem of the military spirit in post-war Germany. Prussia had been characterized by an orientation towards Russia, while other Germanic lands had been oriented towards Western countries. From that point of view, the personality of Konrad Adenauer was most suited for a head of government. The Chancellor was not a representative of the Prussian aristocracy, his surname did not contain the prefix “von”, and the military pomp and ceremony were alien to him. At the same time, when studying that aspect of the German problem, the authors stressed that ambivalence was still a characteristic feature of the German character and behavior. Consequently, the Prussian spirit remained alive in West Germany, although it was noticeably weakened (THAYER, 1957; WILLET, 1989; STENT, 1991; CHAMBERLIN, 1963).

2) Large-scale financial assistance from the United States and the economic revival of Germany.

American researchers noticed that most of the common Germans longed for certainty in life and confidence in the future, including in the socio-economic area. The experience of the 1930s proved that it was the widespread economic instability that awoke “sinister forces” in the political life of Germany. Consequently, the division of Germany after the war was a stabilizing factor in international relations. It made possible, on the one hand, to prevent a new act of German aggression; different parts of Germany found themselves firmly embedded in military-political blocs on different sides of the Cold War barricades. On the other hand, cultivating certain peaceful national traditions – such as the interest in the development of the

private initiative and business, the desire for prosperity and economic abundance –, the United States contributed to the formation and to the organic perception in the West Germany of a new political culture, which were far from the manifestation of “Prussian qualities”. Economic and financial well-being only strengthened the foundations of the new life-style and political thinking (HELLER, 1951; RODNICK, 1948).

## GERMAN REARMAMENT: THE REVIVAL OF THE PRUSSIAN SPIRIT OR THE EMPOWERMENT OF A WESTERN DEMOCRACY?

In the 1950s, the ideas of the Prussian spirit again turned out to be relevant in American historiography. It happened during the discussion and implementation of the rearmament program, and the West Germany inclusion in NATO. The decision to re-equip the German forces and its inclusion in NATO, as well as the subsequent admission of East Germany into the Warsaw Pact, marked a qualitatively new stage in the development of the German problem and the formation of a stable bipolar structure.

Some scholars considered the rearmament of Germany something completely unacceptable if the “sick German consciousness” was an actual fact. They strongly believed that West Germany should have become neutral so that its power could not be used against other states. Economic adviser to the president F.D. Roosevelt – James Warburg – noted that the security of Europe could only be achieved through the creation of a united and temporarily demilitarized Germany. The author called for the settlement of the German question together with the USSR before an armed Germany “*takes over the future of Europe*” (WARBURG, 1953, p. 197). The pessimistic forecast was presented by researcher Tete Harens Tetens. He sharply criticized the idea of German rearmament, believing that there was some sort of Prussian political underworld which was aimed “*to cut the throat of the world*” once again. He noted that German diplomacy was based on the old Pan-German principle of “Germany above all”. However, despite the “*bitter experience with Stresemann and Hitler*”, the West was trying to make friends with the Germans, “*holding out one candy after another*” (TETENS, 1953, pp. 136-153). T.H. Tetens demonstrated solidarity with the ideas of the German philosopher and teacher Friedrich Wilhelm Förster, according to whom “*Teutonic madness, set on fire by the Prussian spirit, spreads throughout the German nation like fire runs through dry grass*” (TETENS, 1961, p. 155). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, F.W. Förster was criticized both in imperial Germany and in the Weimar Republic for active propaganda of pacifism and criticism of the Teutonic heritage in the political culture of Germany. Soon after the publication of the book “*My Struggle Against Militarist and Nationalist Germany*” (1920) he was forced to leave the country. After the NSDAP came to power, his works were publicly burned, and he was included into the list of the intellectual enemies of National Socialism. The appeal of American researchers to F.W. Förster’s heritage in the 1950s looked like an open warning about the possible revival of Prussian spirit in newly born Western democracy.

Criticism of the West Germany rearmament program in American historiography decreased evidently after the country joined NATO. Since it became a *fait accompli*, researchers focused mainly on analyzing the motives of the Western countries for supporting that decision, as well as on its possible consequences. After 1955 American researchers expressed much more optimism and confidence in the strategic success of West Germany rearmament. In their works it got closely related to the issue of European integration. Understanding the concerns of the European allies about the emergence of a new German threat, but not fully sharing them, the United States developed the only correct scheme for rearming Germany – through the integration of the West German state into European and Atlantic structures. Thus, a reliable mechanism for control over German economic and military potential was created. European integration strengthened the relationship between Germany and other European states, which made an open conflict impractical or impossible in the future. At the same time, it reduced the fears of European states and allowed American diplomacy to achieve a strategic goal – to strengthen the total power and influence of the United States on the continent. American authors did not express concern about the possible revival of German revanchism. On the contrary, they were confident that West Germany rearmament and its entry into NATO had a stabilizing effect on international relations within the European sub-system and led to the political rehabilitation of the Germans. American authors considered the German question as a problem of a German state that is too powerful and prone to military expansion. They came to the conclusion that after it joined NATO, the traditional Prussian threat was eliminated. In some way they considered NATO to be the guard of Western democracy in Germany (HANRIEDER, 1985; MCGEEHAN, 1971; BANCHOFF, 1999; SHAKE, 2004).

The perception of German rearmament by American scholars has never been unequivocal. However, the appeal to the Prussian spirit issue was inherent to both supporters and opponents of German rearmament. While the former sought to prove its correctness, others urged not to lose vigilance, since they considered a change in national character impossible.

## UNITED GERMANY: A LATENT PRUSSIAN HEIR OR A TRUE WESTERN DEMOCRACY?

The German unification was the most recent moment when American researchers showed a high interest in the Prussian spirit issue. Professor William Smyser wrote that the Germans dancing on the Berlin Wall stirred up ancient fears of the Prussian spirit, which did not completely disappear even among Western allies during the Cold War (SMYSER, 1999, p. 14). The Germans, defeated and divided in 1945–1990, were under certain control of the Great Powers. In the early 1990s, after German unification and the USSR collapse, the Germans were able to get rid of significant external control. Fears arose that a united Germany could sever the old ties established during the Cold War, since it no longer needed allies. After severing old ties, the Germans might again try to impose their political will on other states and peoples. The researchers noted that different countries experienced that fear to varying degrees. Germany's

geographic neighbors undoubtedly felt it the most. At the same time, everyone realized that the region faced a completely new situation and European countries would have to look for new ways to protect their interests, and maybe even their borders. As a result, the European peoples, reluctantly accepting German unity, focused on finding the best mechanisms for involving Germany in European community, which could neutralize the possible revival of the Prussian spirit (HENRIKSEN, 2007).

However, during this period, most American authors accompanied the analysis of the Prussian heritage with positive forecasts for new Germany. They argued that one should fear not so much a strong and prosperous Germany as a weakened and embittered one. During the 1990s there was a final change of generations at all levels of the socio-political structure of the united Germany. American historians gave a different assessment to denazification, to German rearmament and to the unification results. The concept of “conservative restoration” began to prevail in publications. According to its followers, the old conservative elite, which existed in Germany during the Second Reich and the Weimar Republic, came to power in the united Germany. Thus, it represented a state that returned to traditional conservative values (BOEHLING, 1993; MERRITT, 1995; PROWE, 1993; EISENBERG, 1996). Thus no one speculated on “renazification” in Germany any more. One more question arose for discussion instead: how close/far were the conservative German values to/from the Prussian spirit?

In the first half of the 1990s critical assessments of German influence revival obviously prevailed in American historiography. Alertness and skepticism accompanied publications dedicated to the transformation of united Germany into the undisputed leader of Europe, the main sponsor and inspirer of post-socialist transformations. Evidently, during this period, the United States was busy looking for the balancers of a united Germany. Since not a single state in the region was able to counterbalance German influence, the issue shifted to establishing the closest contacts between the United States and the “historical victims” of Germany, who were least inclined to open borders to German capitals.

Despite the predominance of critical assessments, some American authors in the early 1990s had demonstrated optimism about the unification of Germany. They expressed confidence that its further foreign policy would be based on continuity and moderation, which gave no grounds for alarm. In their opinion, the use of the Prussian spirit as a tool for establishing the status of a world power or forming an anti-Western alliance was a past issue. They proceeded from the fact that the geographical position of Germany in the center of Europe led to its natural interest in the well-being of the region. There could be no healthy Europe without a healthy Germany. Under the new conditions, the creative function of a united Germany was to provide financial support to post-socialist countries in the transition to the market economy (OKEY, 1992; FARRAR, 1996).

In the middle – second half of the 1990s, as the economic and political systems in the post-socialist states were transformed constructively, as well as the procedure for their entry into NATO began, more optimistic assessments of Germany’s role in Europe began to prevail in American publications. Under the influence of the Yugoslav crisis and growth of NATO military spending, the degree of responsibility of the Western allies in the European region was revised. Taking into account the financial capabilities of Germany, the Western allies recognized its constructive role in the processes of reintegration of the post-socialist countries into Europe. The beginning of the procedure for their inclusion in NATO removed questions about the possible

establishment of an exclusive sphere of German influence. After 1999, the European region found itself in tune with NATO's foreign policy. By providing the Germans with the opportunity to deal with economic recovery, the United States assumed the function of overall control over political processes in the region (LEVY, 2015; EVANS, 2018).

Once in 1897, the German State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Bernhard von Bülow, during his speech in the Reichstag said: *"We do not want to put anyone in our shadow, but we also demand our place in the sun"*. From the standpoint of American historians, that feeling of national discrimination pushed the Germans to the brink of World War I. Later, Hitler's coming to power and the World War II was a direct consequence of the humiliating Versailles Treaty and the burdensome, and sometimes impossible for Germany, financial and economic obligations to the victor countries. As the historian David Marsh once noticed, *"if Germany ever again becomes a threat to European stability, then the danger will most likely come from her weakness, not from her strength"* (MARSH, 1994, p. 20). Since the united Germany could not be classified as a weak state, according to American researchers, there was no reason to fear the Prussian spirit revival, only to enjoy the fruits of Western democracy.

## CONCLUSION

In American historiography of the German question, the Prussian spirit has been traditionally associated with aggressive behavior, militarism, forceful foreign policy, and expansionism. It was those features of the German national character and political culture that led the state to two World Wars and brought it to the brink of catastrophe. The task of the United States in the post-war years was to turn Germany into a reliable ally, a democratic and legal state that would not pose a threat to liberal values and US international positions. West Germany was seen as an outpost of the fight against communism during the Cold War. The further fate of all of Europe largely depended on her reliability. In this regard, researchers have repeatedly turned to the analysis of the questions: what is the Federal Republic of Germany? How strong is the influence of the Prussian spirit inside it? Is it possible to transform the German nation-state into a true Western democracy?

The special attention to the problem of the Prussian spirit in the works of American researchers was due to certain initiatives on the German question. Those initiatives implied qualitative changes in the political status of the German state. The formation of West Germany in 1949, its rearmament, the joining to NATO in 1955, the German unification and the liquidation of the Great Powers responsibility in 1990 – each of these events symbolized a new step towards the political revival of Germany, and its return to the community of sovereign actors in international relations. At the same time, such steps provoked a sense of historical dread and led to discussions about the Prussian spirit in the national character and political culture of the Germans. Did the Western allies succeed to create a new Germany committed to the principles of democracy? Or is the Prussian spirit – traditionally associated with bellicosity and desire to dominate – still influencing the national character and political culture of the Germans, waiting for the right moment to prove itself in real politics?



The academic community of the United States adhered to two main approaches when analyzing this question. One group of researchers expressed concern about the increasing independence of the German state, appealed to the invariability of the national character and to the possibility of the Prussian spirit revival. The other group of researchers expressed confidence that the unification of Germany would contribute to the extension of the democratic principles eastward, and to strengthen the relationship between Germany and the West. In their minds, one should not be afraid so much of a strong and prosperous Germany as should be of a weakened and embittered one. History demonstrated the revival of the Prussian spirit mainly when Germans felt their own weakness or limitation of rights in comparison with other European states. After unification, Germany has greatly facilitated the spread of Western economic and political interests in Central and Eastern Europe, including post-socialist and post-Soviet republics. Until nowadays it stays one of the most reliable European allies of the United States, and it defines the further development of EU.

Finally, American researchers, recognizing the existence of special traits on the German national character, came to a general conclusion: Germany justified the trust placed in it after World War II. However, it should not be forgotten that the United States till nowadays retains overall control over German military potential thanks to NATO structures. The Prussian spirit, like an ancient volcano, fell asleep and true Western democracy seems to prosper on the German soil. However, no one knows if it will last forever. American researchers seemed to be absolutely sure about one thing: the Prussian spirit will be sleeping as long as its sleep is being guarded by NATO.

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