

The argument that the EU stops wars

I find it worrying that some advocates of the UK staying in the EU claim that we need the EU to stop a future European war. This I think is a most unfair aspersion to cast on our continental allies, that somehow they would be launching aggressive military actions against each other or against us if there was no EU.

Modern Germany is a country transformed, compared to the Germany of Hitler. Since the defeat Germany has followed the democratic path, upholding civil liberties and the rule of law, and turning against racism and genocide. The western allies worked with the West German state to rebuild it after the huge damage done by the war, and welcomed Germany back into the family of western nations. Most commentary has concentrated on blaming the Nazis for the horrors of the holocaust and the general brutality of the Hitler regime.

All that has been helpful in ensuring a peaceful history in western Europe after the end of the 2nd World War, something a more penal peace did not achieve after the 1st World War. The fact that all the main western countries became democracies was crucial to a prolonged peace, as was the presence of US forces as guarantors of the security of western Europe. There is now a strong habit of co-operation between France and Germany which removed the relationship that caused most tension and war in the past. It is important to remember, however, that whilst many Germans may not have known of the full horrors of the genocide, all Germans did know that their government was unleashing violent forces against all the neighbouring nations of Europe with a view to conquest and occupation, and knew that the regime was removing Jews from their homes. The absence of any effective or wide ranging opposition to Hitler, and his strong showing in a couple of elections before he closed down the Parliament and governed as an autocrat, is part of the record. So is the coercion used by the Hitler government to suppress criticism from those who were affronted by what happened. This makes the change to German attitudes even more welcome and important since 1945.

I found when I was Single Market Minister making frequent trips to the continent to negotiate ever more laws with fellow member states of the EU that some of my fellow Ministers from smaller countries on the continent had a difficult relationship with Germany. I was content to have a professional and friendly approach to the German delegation, and sometimes found the UK was in agreement with them. Quite often other countries would approach me and ask me to oppose the German position as it did not suit them. I told them to oppose it themselves, but they would say they did not feel able to do so. They saw that the UK was willing to make a case it believed in, whichever country or countries agreed or disagreed. We were not afraid to oppose the consensus, or to oppose the Franco-German common position which usually had been agreed before the rest of us met, and was frequently expected to go through by the Commission and some of the other parties. When France and Germany disagreed there was more scope for change and productive exchanges.

The issue of Germany's leadership of the EU has become a much more central

one since the unification of East and West Germany made Germany comfortably the largest and richest economy on the continent. The completion of the Euro has made Germany's role even larger and more contentious with other Euro members. Some think Germany should share more of her surplus with the poorer countries. Some think Germany should relax the austerity policies that have characterised the Euro since its birth. The UK has been more observer than participant in this debate as a non Euro member. One of the main reasons I think the UK leaving the EU will be helpful to them as well as to us is it removes the different UK perspective from the Euro issues which matter greatly to the zone. All the time the Eurozone shares a budget with the rest of the EU, and faces a UK wanting a smaller EU budget, it distorts the debate about how big a budget and how many transfers a successful single currency needs. Germany may lose an ally for smaller EU budgets, but it is Germany who has to answer the fundamental question how much money do you need to transfer round a currency zone so that it can work fairly and well.