Sixty Years On: Commemoration and a New Government

The 60th anniversary of the end of World War Two

The final year of the Schröder government coincided with a major wave of commemoration marking sixty years since the end of the Second World War. The commemorations, including the anniversaries of the D-Day landings, the liberation of Auschwitz and German capitulation, were indication of the global, European and national layers of interpretation outlined thus far. Moreover, they confirmed the tendency for remembrance of the past to be marked by references to contemporary events. Each commemoration struck a slightly different tone. The ceremony at Auschwitz was decidedly international in its scope and coverage. The D-Day commemorations had a particularly European dimension in providing an occasion to reflect on the post-war development of Europe, to integrate the new EU member states from Eastern Europe into a European community of memory and to seal Germany’s rehabilitation as a reliable and equal partner in Europe. The 8 May was more about national reflections on the end of the war. The 60th anniversary commemorations were a chance for Germany to take stock of its post-war development. However, both the Auschwitz and 8 May commemorations were dominated by debates on the far right. In addition, the increased prominence of the narrative of German victimhood presented an awkward parallel narrative to the remembrance of the victims of National Socialist persecution. These were the first commemorations where this layer of interpretation featured in the public domain at the same time as open acknowledgement of German crimes.

The unifying factor of these international, European and national perspectives was the awareness that these might be the last ‘major’ commemorations involving the survivors of the Second World War. The implicit question was how long the Nazi past would continue to be remembered and how long it would continue to have an impact or to play an admonitory role. By extension, in Germany this challenged the durability of the Geschichtspolitik of the SPD-Green government, which had placed the open
confrontation with the legacy of Auschwitz at its core. The 60th anniversary commemorations underlined the Holocaust's position within an international culture of remembrance. The issue was how long authentic memory of this history could be preserved, especially in view of the fact that the next generation will have no family members with direct memory of the National Socialist regime. For Bernd Ulrich, since the last major commemorations in 1995, events such as the 11 September terrorist attacks had heralded the inevitable shift of the Nazi past into history (Zeit, 27 January 2005).

The 2004 D-Day commemorations

The 60th anniversary commemorations began in June 2004 with the anniversary of the D-Day landings. Germany's role in these commemorations suggested that the principles of Leitverantwortung have aided Germany's rehabilitation at international level. Schröder was invited to the ceremonies in Normandy as the first post-war German leader to participate in this annual commemoration. The reactions to his attendance were positive overall, with the focus placed on the democratic development of post-war Germany rather than the crimes of the Third Reich (see, for example, Spiegel Online, 7 June 2004; and Welt, 5 and 7 June 2004). These commemorations showed the instrumentalisation of the past at an international level, with comparisons being made between the war in Iraq and the Second World War and international leaders alluding to their countries' current stance on the 'war on terror'. Hence, the French President Jacques Chirac emphasised the importance of the UN and the American President George Bush spoke of unity between the US and its European allies (Chirac 2004a; Bush 2004). A prime focus of the commemorations was, however, the reconciliation between former enemies. Chirac praised Franco-German cooperation, whilst the UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that Schröder's presence showed the progress made in the post-war period in terms of European integration (Chirac 2004b; BZ, 5 June 2004), progress which had been further emphasised by the EU enlargement to the East one month before the D-Day commemorations. As well as representing a milestone in terms of reconciliation, the occasion indicated that Germany has been integrated into a European narrative of the 20th century rather than standing alone as a pariah nation.

Schröder addressed both national and European layers of interpretation in his speeches at the D-Day commemorations. At a German-French ceremony at Caen, he emphasised Germany's path towards democracy in the post-war period, the importance of the Franco-German alliance and the role of the two countries in the construction of a new Europe. He reiterated that Germany's responsibility for its history translated into a particular commitment to combat racism, anti-semitism and totalitarianism, but also