



The Opinion Pages | LETTERS

Germany, Russia and Ukraine

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Re “Why Germans love Russia” (Opinion, May 6) by Clemens Wergin: It is no revelation that German corporations are heavily invested in Russia and that Germans depend largely on Russia for natural gas, which flows through pipelines in Ukraine. Geopolitical constraints and economic interests may well keep Chancellor Angela Merkel from aligning Germany with America’s more aggressive actions toward President Vladimir V. Putin. But again there’s no surprise here, since one has only to look at America’s recent actions on the world stage to know that we are both motivated by our economic interests.

My larger concern is with Mr. Wergin’s use of Germany’s past to explain its current diplomacy. By saying that German public officials are echoing Russia’s dismissal of Ukraine as a second-class nation “with somewhat lesser sovereignty,” he claims that Germany is returning to the “old and unfortunate German traditions” that existed before the Cold War. He specifically points to World War II, when both the Nazis and Soviets turned Ukraine and surrounding areas into “Bloodlands.”

Mr. Wergin has every right to urge his nation to defend Ukrainian sovereignty, but by claiming that Germans should now be on the right side of history he assumes that many have not yet learned the lessons of the Nazi past. I am afraid his analysis offers little clarity in explaining these very complex issues.

Gecjfrey S. Cahn, Riverdale, N.Y.

The writer is the director of the Holocaust Reconciliation Project.

Germans do not love Russia but are capable of comprehending the Russian perspective. Too few leading German politicians, however, have expressed independent understanding of the true causes of the crisis. Most politicians and nearly all media have been engaged in a synchronized effort to humiliate

Russia. Most Germans support international law and a rule-based world order, but they reject blindly following the interpretation of such law by certain Western leaders who've misled them before. Mr. Wergin's article is an insult to Germans trying to understand all the different interests and positions in this crisis without prejudice.

Ingo Regier, Lake Toxaway, N.C.

Mr. Wergin's analysis of German sentiment toward the Russian annexation of Crimea is based on a romanticized view of history and not grounded in the recent past. Germany perceives Ukraine as "not a real country anyway" not because it lies between Germany and Russia, but because it is heavily immersed in debt. We are slowly emerging from a period when the Mediterranean countries have unnerved Germany because of their euro-damaging debts and cries for German-sponsored bailouts. This has left the German public wary of coming to the aid and rescue of countries in similar financial straits. Mr. Wergin points to Germany's heavy investment in Russian companies (and doesn't mention Russia's enormous consumption of German goods) as only a secondary reason for inaction against Russia, but this is entirely the point: Germany's political elite are far better suited to taking the side of the customer and investment over that of an indebted state.

Ari Gerstman, Washington

Mr. Wergin's opinion article is excellent, but he fails to mention an important aspect of 20th century history. The agreement between the Soviet Union and Germany that was signed at Rapallo, Italy, in 1922 included a secret clause that allowed Germany to train its military in Russia. Signed by Lenin's government, the treaty enabled the German military buildup through the 1920s and 1930s under Stalin. The German army practiced with tanks and warplanes, overseen by a German Army General Staff — all forbidden under the Versailles Treaty. It is hard to imagine World War II without this support from the Soviet Union. But people never ask, in discussing the war, how out of defeat Germany built such a powerful military force when it was forbidden to do so. And few ever ask why the Soviet Union did this.

Peggy Troupin, New York

Mr. Wergin expresses concern about Germans favoring Russia in the Ukrainian conflict. That fear is well-founded; the writer notes that German collusion with Russia prior to World War II had disastrous results. Perhaps

Germany should abandon that brand of power-driven diplomacy. Europe waged war on itself in 1914 because nation-states played a zero-sum game. Today Germany should work with the international community to find solutions that benefit the world and maintain stability.

Hard Lessons for South Korea

Richard Miller, Charlotte, N.C.

Re “South Korea’s tragic failure” (Opinion, May 7) by Young-ha Kim: I agree with the writer that South Korea will never be the same after the ferry disaster that took so many lives. But I don’t necessarily agree with his negative vision of the future. More mothers are now taking their children to classes in swimming and in emergency evacuation. This will spread, and schools will add such training to their curriculums. When our children graduate from college, get jobs and advance in their careers, things will necessarily look quite different. Along the way it is hoped that they will learn to take responsibility for their actions. Fundamentally, that comes with respecting one another. When people feel respected — whether they are ship-safety inspectors, captains or civil servants — they will take their jobs more seriously.

Sejeong Kim, Seoul, South Korea

The writer is a correspondent for environment and gender issues for The Korea Times.

Camp guards deserve nothing

Re “Prosecutions surge in Nazi death camp guard cases” (News, May 7): I have no sympathy for the guards who evaded prosecution for 70 years — not even when they are frail. I am the survivor of a camp in Germany where I was taken as a seven-year-old. Dead of winter with no food, heat or medical care is what I, my mother and brother had to contend with — and watching, every morning, the carts pulled by starving inmates with naked, dead bodies piled high heading to the ovens. The years following the war gave these guards a complete and possibly a happy family life, while I lost my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins of my age to Auschwitz. I can’t possibly imagine how these guards had the temerity to work in those death camps. Yes, they were following orders as they asserted.

Marianne E. Erdos, New York

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