

REITH LECTURES 1957: Russia, the Atom and the West

George Kennan

Lecture 3: The Problem of Eastern and Central Europe

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I referred in last week's talk to the specific issues involved in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. These issues fall generally into two categories: the basic ones, by which I mean disagreements over things such as frontiers and the political control of territory, and the secondary ones—ones flowing, in this case, from the military rivalry that has now grown up between Nato and the Soviet bloc. Here it is the basic ones—and one of them in particular—that I want to discuss.

I would know of no basic issues of genuine gravity between Russia and the West other than those arising directly from the manner in which the recent world war was allowed to come to an end. I am referring here particularly to the fact that the authority of a united German Government was expunged on the territory of Germany itself and throughout large areas of Eastern Europe, and the armies of the Soviet Union and the Western democracies were permitted to meet in the middle of this territory and to take control of it, before there was any adequate agreement among them as to its future permanent status. This situation was, of course, the combined result of the unconditional surrender policy, which relieved the Germans of all responsibility for the future status of this area, and the failure of the Allied Governments to arrive at any realistic understandings among themselves about it while the war was on.

Since it has not been possible to reach such understandings subsequently, except in the case of Austria, the provisorium flowing from these circumstances has endured. It is this that we are faced with today.

There is, of course, a similar problem in the Far East. A precisely analogous situation prevails in the case of Korea and Formosa. The Allies dislodged the Japanese from these areas without having arrived at any proper understanding with the Russians as to their future status. There, too, the question remains open; and it does indeed constitute an issue in the relations between the Soviet Union and a portion of the Western community.

For reasons of time and of simplicity, I shall restrict myself here to the European theatre, though much of what I shall have to say would have its applicability to this situation in the Far East as well. In Europe the difficulty obviously breaks down into two parts: the satellite area and Germany.

I am sure there is no need for me to go into details about the situation in the satellite area. You all know what has happened in these past three or four years. The Moscow leaders made an attempt to undo some of the harm that Stalin had done with his policies of ruthless political oppression and economic exploitation. The first effects of this relaxation—as shown in the disorders in Eastern Germany and Poland and later in

Hungary—was not to reconcile people to the fact of Soviet rule but rather to reveal the real depths of their restlessness and the extent to which the post-war arrangements had outworn whatever usefulness they might once have had. The Soviet leaders, startled and alarmed by these revelations, have now seen no alternative, in the interests of their own political and military security, but to reimpose sharp limits to the movement for greater independence in these countries, and to rely for the enforcement of these restrictions on the naked use or presence of their own troops.

The result has been, as we all know, the creation of an extremely precarious situation, dangerous and unsatisfactory from everyone's standpoint. The state of the satellite area today, and particularly of Poland, is neither fish nor fowl, neither complete Stalinist domination nor real independence. Things cannot be expected to remain this way for long. There must either be further violent efforts by people in that area to take things into their own hands and to achieve independence by their own means, or there must be the beginning of some process of real adjustment to the fact of Soviet domination. In the first of these contingencies, we in the West could easily be placed once more before the dilemma which faced us last year at the time of the Hungarian uprising; and anyone who has the faintest concern for the stability of the world situation must fervently pray that this will not happen.

Will the hope for Independence Die?

As for the second alternative, which at this moment appears to be the more likely of the two, it seems no less appalling. If things go on as they are today, there will simply have to be some sort of adjustment on the part of the peoples of Eastern Europe, even if it is one that takes the form of general despair, apathy, demoralisation, and the deepest sort of disillusionment with the West. The failure of the recent popular uprisings to shake the Soviet military domination has now produced a state of bitter despondency throughout large parts of Eastern Europe. If the taste or even the hope for independence once really dies out in the hearts of these peoples, there will be no recovering it; then Moscow's victory will be complete. Eastern Europe will then be permanently lost to Europe proper and to the possibility of any normal participation in international life.

I can conceive of no escape from this dilemma that would not involve the early departure of Soviet troops from the satellite countries. Recent events have made it perfectly clear that it is the presence of these troops, coupled with the general military and political situation in Europe, which lies at the heart of the difficulty. Only when the troops are gone will there be possibilities for the evolution of these nations toward the institutions and social systems most suited to their needs; and what these institutions and systems might then be, is something about which I think we in the West can afford to be very relaxed. If socialism is what these people want and need, so be it; but let it by all means be their own choice.

It is plain that there can be no Soviet military withdrawal from Eastern Europe unless this entire area can in some way be removed as an object in the military rivalry of the Great Powers. But this at once involves the German problem. It involves the German problem not only because it implies the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Germany, but because so long as American and other Western forces remain in Western Germany it will be impossible for the Russians to view their problem in

Eastern Europe otherwise than in direct relation to the overall military equation between Russia and the West. Any solution of the problem of the satellite area is thus dependent on a solution of the German problem itself. This is one of the reasons why I am inclined to feel that the German question still stands at the centre of world tensions; that no greater contribution can be made to world peace than the removal of the present deadlock over Germany; and that if, in fact, it is not removed, the chances for peace are slender indeed.

This being the case, I think we cannot scrutinise too closely or too frequently, in the light of the developing situation, the position our governments have taken in the question of Germany in recent years. This position, as I understand it, is one that has insisted, and with good reason, that the modalities of German unification must flow from the will of the German people, expressed in free elections. But it has gone farther than that. It has also insisted that no restrictions whatsoever must be placed in advance on the freedom of a future all-German government to determine its own international orientation and to incur military obligations to other states. Specifically, the Western governments have insisted that such an all-German government shall be entirely free to continue to adhere to the Nato Pact, as the German Federal Republic does today; and it is taken everywhere as a foregone conclusion that an all-German government would do exactly that.

The question at once arises as to what would happen in such a contingency—if, that is, a future united Germany should choose to adhere to Nato, with the garrisons of the various allied powers now stationed on German soil? The Western position says nothing specific about this. But the Soviet Union is not a member of Nato; and while British, French, and American forces would, in this contingency, presumably remain in Germany under the framework of the Nato system, one must assume that those of the Soviet Union would be expected to depart. If this is so, then Moscow is really being asked to abandon—as part of an agreement on German unification—the military and political bastion in Central Europe which it won by its military effort from 1941 to 1945, and to do this without any compensatory withdrawal of American armed power from the heart of the Continent.

This, in my opinion, is something the Soviet Government is most unlikely to accept, for reasons of what it will regard as its own political security at home and abroad. It will be hard enough, even in the best of circumstances, for Moscow ever to extract itself from its present abnormal responsibilities and involvements in Eastern Europe without this having repercussions on its political system generally. It cannot, realistically, be asked to take this step in any manner that would seriously jeopardise its prestige. The Soviet leaders are not likely to be impressed with such paper assurances as the Western Powers may undertake to give, to the effect that a unilateral withdrawal would not be exploited to Russia's disadvantage. The mere fact of Soviet withdrawal, without any equivalent withdrawal on the Western side, would create the general impression of a defeat for Soviet policy in Eastern and Central Europe generally.

The Soviet leaders will therefore see in these present Western proposals a demand for something in the nature of an unconditional capitulation of the Soviet interest in the German question generally; and it will surely occur to them that if they ever should be so weak as to have no choice but to quit Germany on these terms, it would scarcely

take an agreement with the Western Powers to enable them to do so. So long, therefore, as it remains the Western position that the hands of a future all-German government must not be in any way tied in the matter of Germany's future military engagements, I see little hope for any removal of the division of Germany at all—nor, by the same token, the removal of the division of Europe.

There are those in our Western camp, I know, who find in this state of affairs no great cause for concern. A divided Germany seems, for the moment, to be less of a problem to them than was the united Germany of recent memory. They regard the continued presence of American forces in Germany as an indispensable pledge of American military interest in the Continent, and they tremble at the thought that this pledge should ever be absent. It is agreeable to them that America, by assuming this particular burden and bearing it indefinitely, should relieve Western Europe of the necessity of coming to grips itself with the German question.

The Situation in Berlin

This view is understandable in its way. There was a time, in the immediate post-war period, when it was largely justified. But there is danger in permitting it to harden into a permanent attitude. It expects too much, and for too long a time, of the United States, which is not a European power. It does less than justice to the strength and the abilities of the Europeans themselves. It leaves unsolved the extremely precarious and unsound arrangements which now govern the status of Berlin—the least disturbance of which could easily produce a new world crisis. It takes no account of the present dangerous situation in the satellite area. It renders permanent what was meant to be temporary. It assigns half of Europe, by implication, to the Russians.

Let me stress particularly this question of Berlin. There is a stubborn tendency in our two countries to forget about the Berlin situation so long as it gives us no trouble, and to assume that everything will somehow work out for the best. May I point out that the Western position in Berlin is by no means a sound or safe one; and it is being rendered daily more uncertain by the ominous tendency of the Soviet Government to thrust forward the East German regime as its spokesman in these matters. Moscow's purpose in this manoeuvre is obviously to divest itself of responsibility.—for the future development of the Berlin situation. It hopes by this means to place itself in a position where it can remain serenely aloof while the East German regime proceeds to make the Western position in the city an impossible one.

This is a sure portent of trouble. The future of Berlin is vital to the future of Germany as a whole: the needs of its people and the extreme insecurity of the Western position there would alone constitute reasons why no one in the West should view the present division of Germany as a satisfactory permanent solution, even if no other factors were involved at all.

It would of course be wholly wrong to suggest that it is only the uncertainty of the Western position about the future of the garrisons in Germany that stands in the way of a settlement. I have no doubt that any acceptable arrangement for German unification would be an extremely difficult thing to negotiate in any case. Many other obstacles would be bound to arise. It took ten years to negotiate a similar settlement for Austria. I can imagine that it might also take years to reach agreement on

Germany. But I think we are justified in assuming that it is this question of the indefinite retention of the American and other Western garrisons on German soil which lies at the heart of the difficulty; and until greater clarity is achieved about this point, there can be no proper beginning.

Pushing the Kremlin against a Closed Door

It will at once be held against what I have said that Moscow itself does not today want German unification on any terms. Perhaps so. Certainly in recent months there have been no signs of enthusiasm in Moscow for any settlement of this sort. But we do not know how much of this lack of enthusiasm is resignation in the face of the Western position. Until we stop pushing the Kremlin against a closed door, we shall never learn whether it would be prepared to go through an open one. Today, our calculations with regard to Moscow's reaction to proposals for a mutual withdrawal of forces rest exclusively on speculation; for Moscow has been given no reason to suppose that Western force would under any circumstances be withdrawn from the major portion of Germany.

We must also bear in mind that things change from time to time in Moscow, just as they do here in the West. If the disposition to conclude a German settlement does not exist today in Moscow, our positions should at least be such as to give promise of agreement when and if this attitude changes. Finally, the question is not just whether Moscow, as people say, 'wants' German unification. It is a question of whether Moscow could afford to stand in the way of it if there were a possibility of a general evacuation of Europe. Gomulka not long ago promised the Polish people that the day the Americans leave Germany he will take up with the Soviet government the question of the departure of the Soviet forces from Poland. And it is clear that as Poland goes, in this respect, so goes the rest of the satellite area. Mr. Khrushchev has not specifically demurred at Gomulka's position; on the contrary, he has, in fact, even murmured things himself, from time to time, about a possible mutual withdrawal of forces, although he has intimated that the price of a Soviet withdrawal might be somewhat higher than what Gomulka implied. In any case, the interest of the satellite governments in a general evacuation of Germany is perfectly clear. If, therefore, a more promising Western position would not assure agreement at this time, it would at least serve to put a greater strain on Moscow's position, and to shift clearly and definitely to the Soviet side the onus of delaying a reasonable European settlement—an onus which in this case would have to be maintained against the feelings of many people in the satellite regimes as well as people elsewhere.

Are there, then, points at which the Western position could safely be improved? It is hard for an outsider to answer such a question in this rapidly moving time. Only governments are privy to all the relevant information. I can only say that there are two features of our present thinking which, in my opinion, might well undergo particular re-examination.

I wonder, in the first place, whether it is actually politic and realistic to insist that a future all-German government must be entirely free to determine Germany's military orientation and the obligations, and that the victor Powers of the recent war must not in any way prejudice that freedom by any agreement among themselves. This is outwardly a very appealing position. It gratifies the Western attachment to the

principle of national self-expression. It is, for obvious reasons, a position no German politician can lightly oppose. We can hardly expect of the Germans that they should take the initiative in questioning it. But is it sound, and is it constructive?

A peace treaty has not yet been concluded. The powers of the victors have not yet formally lapsed. Might it not just be that the only politically feasible road to unification and independence for Germany should lie precisely through her acceptance of certain restraints on freedom to shape her future military position in Europe? And, if so, is it not a little quixotic to cling, in the name of the principle of German freedom and independence, to a position which implies the sacrifice of all freedom and all independence for many millions of Germans, namely the people of Eastern Germany, for an indefinite time to come? No useful purpose is going to be served by the quest for perfect solutions. The unlocking of the European tangle is not to be achieved except at some sort of a price. Is there not, in this insistence that the hands of a future German government must not be in any way tied, an evasion of the real responsibility the victor Powers bear for resolving this present dangerous situation in Central Europe? This is, after all, a situation which they, not the Germans, created. Are they now to resign entirely to the Germans the responsibility for resolving it?

The second element of Western thinking about the German problem that might well stand further examination is the common assumption that the Western Powers would be placed at a hopeless military disadvantage if there were to be any mutual withdrawal of forces from the heart of Europe.

It is, of course, impossible to discuss this question in specific terms unless one knows just what sort of withdrawal is envisaged, from where and to where, and by whom and when. Here, as is frequently forgotten, there are many possible combinations; and I am not at all sure that all of these have really been seriously explored by our military planners.

But, beyond this, I have the impression that our calculations in this respect continue to rest on certain questionable assumptions and habits of thought: on an overrating of the likelihood of a Soviet effort to invade Western Europe, on an exaggeration of the value of the satellite armies as possible instruments of a Soviet offensive policy, on a failure to take into account the implications of the ballistic missile; and on a serious under-estimation of the advantages to Western security to be derived from a Soviet military withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe. I wonder how the military implications of a general withdrawal would appear if these distortions were removed.

People will ask: how do you envisage the future of Germany, if not as a full-fledged member of Nato? Is it neutrality you are recommending, or demilitarisation, or a general European security pact?

Nato's Real Strength

These again are problems for the planners. The combinations are many; and they must be studied minutely, as alternatives. No outsider can judge which is best. I would only say that it seems to me far more desirable on principle to get the Soviet forces out of Central and Eastern Europe than to cultivate a new German army for the purpose of

opposing them while they remain there. And as for a European security pact—I am no lover of security pacts, and have, as a historian, never understood the great value other people attach to them; but I cannot see that this sort of thing would necessarily invalidate the essential relationships of Nato. It cannot be stressed too often that Nato's real strength does not lie in the paper undertakings which underpin it: it lies—and will continue in any circumstances to lie—in the appreciation of the member nations for the identity of their real interests, as members of the Western spiritual and cultural community. If this appreciation is there, Nato will not be weaker as a political reality, because it may be supplemented or replaced by other arrangements so far as Germany is concerned.

I shall also be asked whether I am suggesting that Bonn should deal with the East German regime, as Mr. Khrushchev says it must if unification is ever to be arranged. This, I think, is very much Western Germany's own business. The German problem is not going to be solved, as things stand today, by Germans alone. Moscow, try as it may, cannot avoid its responsibility in this question. It is with Moscow that we Americans and British, at any rate, must deal.

The Kremlin would of course like to see the East German regime extort, as a price for unification, some sort of privileged and protected position for itself, as a political faction within a future all-German state. This is obviously undiscussable. But it would seem to an outsider that people in Western Germany could afford to be very generous in defining the stages by which unification should be arrived at. Nothing could be more foolish, on the West German side, than to let vindictiveness, intolerance, or political passion block the road. The long period of Communist rule in Eastern Germany will have left strong marks on the structure of life there. There will certainly be a demand on the Communist side that not all these marks should be obliterated. One can have one's own opinion as to whether they are positive or negative, whether they represent scars or achievements. But there is no reason why many of them should not be taken account of, as facts, in any future settlement. Whether or not, for example, the industries of that region should remain socialised would seem to me, compared with what else is at stake, one of the least important of the problems in question.

My plea, then, is not that we delude ourselves that we can have a German settlement tomorrow; and it is not that we make frivolous and one-sided concessions to obtain one. My plea is only that we remember that we have a problem here, which must sooner or later be solved, and better sooner than later; and that we do our best to see that the positions we adopt with relation to it are at all times as hopeful and constructive as they can be made.

Let me add one last word on the general background of this German problem. One of the arguments most frequently heard in opposition to the introduction of any greater flexibility into the Western position in Germany is that 'you can't trust the Germans'. It is therefore better, people say, that Germany should be held divided and in part dependent on the West, than that the Germans should once again be permitted independence of action as a nation. This is a judgement drawn, in the overwhelming majority of cases, from the unhappy experience of the past. Many of those who draw it are not acquainted with the contemporary Germany.

I do not share this opinion. Germany is in a state of great transition. One can easily find, within its changing scene, anything one seeks. It is true that many of the older generation are not likely ever to recover entirely from the trauma of the past; they tend to be twisted people in one way or another, which does not necessarily mean that they are Nazis. But I have seen, as an academic lecturer whose own education took place partly in Germany, a little of the younger Germany; and I am convinced that these young people, troubled, bewildered, unsupported at this time by any firm tradition from their own national past, will not fail to respond to any Western appeal that carries the ring of real vision, of conviction, and of seriousness of purpose. The younger generation of Germans are more threatened today by the inroads of a pervasive cynical materialism than they are by any extreme nationalistic tendencies; and it is precisely here, in combating this materialism, that we in the West have given them, I fear, little help or inspiration. To stake our future on the younger Germany is admittedly to take a chance; but I can think of no greater risk than the trend toward nuclear war on which we are all now being carried.

If Germany cannot be accorded reasonable confidence in these coming years then I would know of no promising solution to the entire problem of Europe. To assume that such confidence cannot be given is to cut ourselves off in advance from possibilities that may be vital to our very survival. If we are going to make so negative and so hopeless an assumption, let us be terribly, terribly sure that our judgement is drawn not from the memories and emotions of the past but from the soberest sort of attention to' present realities.