

Germany and Europe

The battleground country

Two compelling analyses of Germany in our time and before

Apr 20th 2013 | From the print edition

Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present. By Brendan Simms.

Basic Books; 690 pages; \$35. Allen Lane; £30. Buy from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

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German Europe. By Ulrich Beck. *Polity; 98 pages; \$19.95 and £16.99.* Buy from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

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ONE country and one person have been at the fore in the euro crisis: Germany and its chancellor, Angela Merkel. Unlike almost all other European leaders, she remains trusted and even popular at home. But in recent months both she and her country have been vilified around the rest of Europe for imposing excessive austerity, with reminiscences of the second world war and cartoons depicting her as Hitler. In short, what is known as the German question—how to contain a dominant country at the heart of Europe—is back.

That makes Brendan Simms's new history especially timely. He has, in effect, dropped a big stone into the European pond and stood back to watch the ripples spread. His thesis is simply stated: that ever since the mid-1400s, the central issue for Europe has been the German question, even before the country formally came into being in the late 19th century.

Other powers such as Turkey, France, Spain, Britain and Russia fought against each other and with various German statelets largely in order to secure control over the Holy Roman Empire (Henry VIII of England and Suleiman the Magnificent of Turkey even made fitful attempts to be elected emperor instead of Charles V). And after the empire was unceremoniously dissolved in 1806, the struggle to contain Germany became the *leitmotif* of successive European and world wars.

It is a compelling and provocative thesis, albeit one that is more persuasive once it gets to the 18th century, Mr Simms's previous stamping-ground. Indeed, the author deals with the first 300 years in fewer than 100 pages. As he goes on to argue, today's European Union, which was created largely in an attempt to answer the German question, is once again struggling with German power.

This is sweeping history, told with verve and panache, and it is all the more refreshing for that. It is particularly valuable to be reminded of the importance of the web of mostly tiny principalities that made up the empire, famously described by Voltaire as neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. In creating a united Germany in the 1870s Bismarck built what would shortly become Europe's strongest country; but the lands were of crucial significance long before he was born.

The book has some defects. Mr Simms is prone to overstatement, for example. "Europe" is spattered with words for Germany like core, heart, key, fulcrum and central. As a professor of the history of international relations, he tends to overplay the diplomacy and war and underplay the economics and domestic policy.

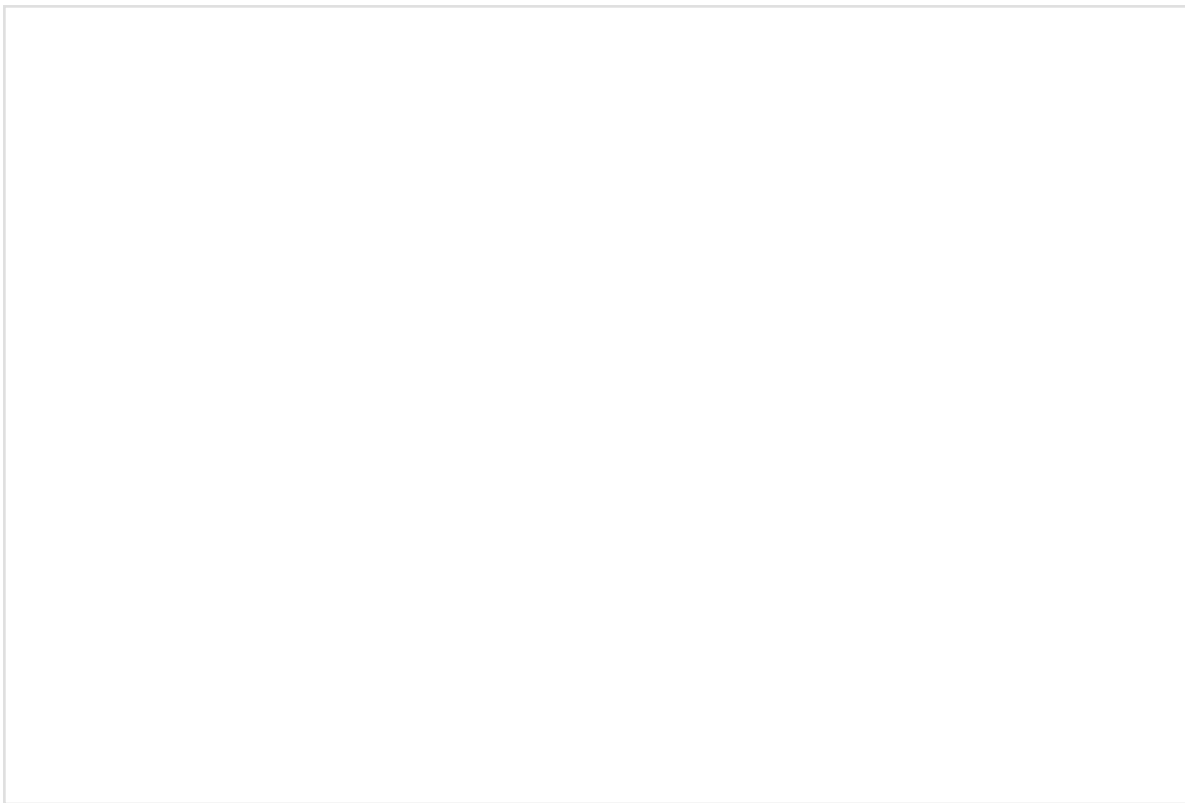
The Thirty Years War was mainly fought in German territory, for instance, but the purpose of the Treaty of Westphalia that ended it surely went further than to "guard against German princes exercising untrammelled sovereignty". It is an exaggeration to say that the driving force of the French revolution was to re-establish national greatness on the European stage. And it goes too far to attribute the English civil war, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American war of independence and the repeal of the Corn Laws mainly to British foreign policy.

Nor is it right always to insist that Germany mattered most of all. The concern of most countries was rather to maintain a balance of power, with the focus being at different times on attempts at European dominance by the Ottomans, the Spanish, the French and the Russians, as well as the Germans. But Mr Simms is right to place European concerns at the heart of British and American history, something today's Eurosceptics should remember.

What of the future? In place of conclusions, Mr Simms poses several questions. The EU and the euro were conceived largely to subsume German power within a wider Europe. And yet, as he says, the euro crisis has had the effect of making it more dominant than ever. He hints that the solution has to be deeper political integration. And he suggests that only two countries can make this happen: Britain, which still seems semi-detached, and Germany, which only acts as a reluctant leader.

Ulrich Beck, a sociologist and arch-European federalist known at home as a fierce critic of nationalism, also calls in his short book for a more united Europe. He complains that the EU was meant to create a European Germany, but what it is producing is a German Europe. He calls Mrs Merkel a "Merkiavelli" who has exploited the crisis to advance German interests (some would say this is what she was elected to do). As he says, "only one fate is worse than being overwhelmed by German money and that is *not* being overwhelmed by German money."

Yet the real enemy now may be not German dominance, but German inaction. Unless Mrs Merkel, who is likely to be re-elected in September, puts more German credit and less austerity on the table, the euro might break up. And, as Mr Simms says at the end of his splendid book, the EU could then go down in history as an "expensive youthful prank".



From the print edition: Books and arts