

European commonalities and perspectives

Culture as the basis for peace and prosperity

by Wolfgang Bittner,* Germany



Wolfgang Bittner. (Photo wolfgangbittner.de)

After a few years of thaw in German-Russian relations and an initially still pale sun of peace and prosperity had penetrated the dark clouds, there is once again an acute cold war due to the war in Ukraine after 24 February 2022, which can quickly turn into a hot war. Aggression that threatens the very exist-

ence of Europe continues to be fomented, Russia is permanently provoked, and it does not look as if this tragedy of the century will soon come to an end and the peoples of Europe will return to their commonalities. At present, the opposite is the case; strong centrifugal forces and divergent political ideas are increasingly leading to conflicts, also within the European states.

A Europe of sovereign states

There is renewed talk of a more independent Europe of sovereign states (the so-called Europe of fatherlands), i.e., a turning away from the US-friendly policies that have led to ruinous conditions. To start with gigantic rearmament and a strengthening of NATO shows how messed up the situation is. In recent years, the *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* led by the USA has developed from a defensive alliance into an alliance of aggression that presumes to act globally in accordance with the monopoly claim of the USA.

To focus on the project of a European army for the sake of Europe's independence seems equally misguided. Within NATO, such an army would ultimately be subordinate to the US milit-

ary, which would then have unrestricted access to European combat units for its wars of intervention. And outside NATO, after the British left the EU, the nuclear power France would dominate.

What is at stake is much more essential, namely a rethinking and reorganisation of Europe. And this cannot be achieved in the neoliberal dictatorship with which the population is confronted, not with this Brussels being blown out of proportion and the US networks and some 12,000 lobby representations that help shape policy there, not with the prevailing rearmament hysteria, the economic and military intervention policy and the austerity targets that are driving poorer countries to ruin.

Russian participation is indispensable for the reorganisation of Europe, which cannot only be about economics, technology or the military. For without Russia, there will be no peaceful, prosperous Europe. In this respect, all efforts in the near future must be directed towards confidence-building measures, negotiations and reconciliation with Russia. There are progressive efforts to this end throughout Europe. The decisive question will be whether the declarations will be followed by deeds and how this shattered Europe, if it were more independent, should be shaped in the future.

European culture

Even more it is important to remember the commonalities that unite the peoples of Europe, regardless of the will and propaganda of nationalist-minded circles. These commonalities are to be found in culture. For intellectual and cultural exchange has never been limited to a regional or

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tung), radio and television. His works have been translated into numerous languages and he has received several literary awards. He has held teaching positions at home and abroad, including guest professorships in Poland. For several years, Bittner has published articles in alternative media such as the *NachDenkSeiten*, *Ossi-etzky* or *RT*. He lives as a freelance writer in Göttingen.

national level or ideologically restricted. There were epochs in Europe when borders were more permeable than in our recent past.

So, we speak of European culture, and those who speak of it usually mean the literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture etc. cultivated in European countries. In the broadest sense, it also includes respect for human rights, education, housing conditions or eating habits, even transport, care for the sick and elderly or the treatment of prisoners. We call all this culture, which has developed over the centuries.

European culture is based primarily on four pillars. Firstly, Greek philosophy and humanitas; secondly, Roman civilisation and Roman law in conjunction with Germanic-Celtic influences; thirdly, the Christian and Jewish religions; and fourthly, more recently, the French Revolution with its demand for freedom, equality and solidarity and the social ideas and visions based on it. Incidentally, the French Declaration of Human and Civil Rights of 1789 already had predecessors in Corsica and in Poland, which is hardly known today.

The origins of what we today generally call inalienable and indivisible human rights can in turn be traced back to the natural law ideas of antiquity as well as to the ancient popular rights in the European area. These fundamental rights and principles, which later manifested themselves in the English *Magna Charta Libertatum* of 1215 and in the *Habeas Corpus Act* of 1679, among others, were also adopted for American liberties.

But how could a common European culture develop in such a fractured entity as medieval Europe, we ask ourselves today. And in doing so, we overlook the fact that cultural exchange in earlier centuries was at least as intense and problem-free at times as it has been in the 21st century in the era following the temporary end of the Cold War, which had divided Europe into hostile camps for decades. Such crossings of borders and their significance for literature, art and the sciences cannot be overestimated; this applies to past centuries, but also to the present time, in which we are experiencing an epochal step backwards since the sanctions policy imposed by the USA and the staged war in Ukraine.

Crossing borders

As recently as 2001, Russian President *Vladimir Putin* said in a speech to the German Bundestag

– which was still possible back then: “Culture has always been our common good and has united peoples.” Russia is the largest country in Europe, and this is currently being systematically suppressed and gradually forgotten. For centuries, there were intensive trade relations, cultural and scientific exchange between the countries of Western Europe and Russia. What would European culture be without Russian literature, art, music, without Russian theatre? I only mention the writers and poets *Tolstoy*, *Dostoevsky*, *Chekhov*, *Gorky*, *Pushkin* and *Yevtushenko*, the painters *Yavlensky*, *Malevich* and *Repin* (I immediately have the *Volgatreidler* in mind), the musicians *Prokofiev*, *Shostakovich* and *Tchaikovsky* (I hear the *Nutcracker Suite*). *Pushkin* read *Goethe*, *Goethe* read *Pushkin*, to this day *Heinrich Heine* is revered in Russia and *Beethoven* dedicated his *Polonaise Op. 89* to *Tsarina Elisabeth*, for which he was given a generous allowance in gratitude. *Tsar Peter I* worked incognito in a Dutch shipyard in 1607 to learn the techniques of shipbuilding, and *Albert Lortzing* wrote the libretto for his opera “*Tsar and Carpenter*” based on this historical episode.

There has always been a lively cultural exchange between European countries and between their poets and artists. It is no secret that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe got his “ultimate kick” during a trip to Italy. And his drama “*Faust*” is based on a tradition that first appeared in a German folk book in 1587 and tells of a man who enters a pact with the devil. The model for this was apparently the physician and scholar *Paracelsus*, born in Switzerland in 1493, who lived and practised in Austria and Italy. The English playwright *Christopher Marlowe* (1564–1593) also wrote a play on this theme – the pact with the devil – long before Goethe.

For many creative artists, there were no limits. The Nuremberg sculptor *Veit Stoss*, for example, carved the altar in St Mary’s Church in Krakow from 1477 to 1489, which is still admired today. *Nicolaus Copernicus* was born in Torun (Thorn), and when he enrolled at university in Italy, he did not know – it is attested – whether he should state his origin as German or Polish. *Erasmus of Rotterdam* maintained an extensive correspondence with intellectual greats throughout Europe, including *Justus Decius*, advisor to the Polish King *Sigismund the Elder* in Cracow. *Justus Decius* (actually *Jost Ludwig Dietz*) came from Alsace, which belonged to Germany at the time,

and was considered one of the most influential personalities in Poland at the time.

Friedrich Schiller was influenced by the ideas of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*; the French philosopher *Voltaire* lived for a time at the court of *Frederick the Great* in Berlin; the Silesian poet *Andreas Gryphius* – he lived from 1616 to 1664 and wrote wonderful melancholy poems – met the Dutch poet *Joost van den Vondel* in Amsterdam. The poet *Jakob Lenz* and other German poets, forerunners of Romanticism, went to Poland and Russia. *Heinrich Heine* and *Ludwig Börne* emigrated to Paris, *Georg Büchner* fled – pursued by the Hessian secret police – to France and Switzerland, where he died at the age of 24.

The great Polish poet *Adam Mickiewicz* lived for years in Russia and in France, the English poet *Lord Byron* in Switzerland and in Italy. *Dostoevsky* played roulette in the Baden-Baden casino, in Bad Homburg and in Paris. *Tolstoy* visited schools in Germany to get ideas for a school in his Russian village *Jasnaja Poljana*. The Spanish cultural philosopher *Ortega y Gasset* studied in Germany and lived in France and the Netherlands, among other places, since the Spanish Civil War. The famous German-language poets *Franz Kafka* and *Max Brod* lived in Prague, *Franz Werfel* and *Karl Kraus* in Vienna. The German writer *Alfred Döblin* travelled through Poland for a few months in 1923 and left behind his highly interesting social-analytical notes “Journey to Poland”, which appeared in 1926.

During the “Third Reich” and the Second World War, German writers and artists emigrated to Sweden, for example *Kurt Tucholsky*, *Bertolt Brecht* and *Peter Weiss*, or to England, for example *Alfred Kerr*, *Kurt Schwitters* or *Sebastian Haffner*. German and Polish existentialists and intellectuals fled from German fascism first to the Netherlands and finally on to France and Spain. And in the 1970s, many Greek artists fled from Greek fascism to Germany, France and Poland. Later, numerous dissidents from the communist countries of Eastern Europe came to Western Europe.

But many painters also changed their place of residence, such as *Chagall*, *Kandinsky* and *Jawlensky*, who went from Russia to France and to Germany. *Gauguin* married a Swedish woman. The sculptor *Brancusi* even walked from Romania to Paris. And the Norwegian painter *Edward Munch* also turned to Paris, as did the

Swedish playwright *August Strindberg* or the famous Polish composer *Frédéric Chopin*. *Sigmund Freud*, founder of psychoanalysis, emigrated from Vienna to London.

And let’s look at the architecture. Entire streets in Riga or Vilnius could just as easily be in Lübeck; in some quarters of Krakow or Lemberg you think you are in Vienna or Prague; Italian architects worked in Germany, France, Russia or Poland. Master builders from many European countries were united in the cathedral building lodges.

All these artists, writers, poets, architects and scholars inspired each other, and in this respect, we can speak of a European art and literature, of a European culture. Each brought his own national character, his personality, shaped by the regional culture, by local peculiarities, social conditions, landscape, folklore, etc. Let’s look at *Chagall* and his work: his paintings reflect his Russian-Jewish childhood. Or *Franz Werfel*, an author of Jewish origin who lived in Austria before emigrating to France and on to the USA; he wrote a bestseller about the Catholic pilgrimage site of Lourdes in France.

Over the centuries, a lively cultural exchange has developed not only between East and West, but also between North and South, into which the countries have brought their own impulses and developed a common European identity, despite different mentalities, political strategies, and armed conflicts. However, it must be noted that this process has been seriously disrupted by targeted influence from the USA. A future coordinated cultural policy should be able to intervene here in a regulating and preserving way.

Summary

Literature, music, painting, visual arts, or architecture can cross borders, people hear and learn from each other, they overcome their foreignness. There are endless possibilities to build bridges through culture, which is ultimately the basis for any economic or technical development. That is essential! With ease, writers and artists cross borders, of which there are still far too many, and they have no problems with each other. There are other connections and commonalities between people than nationality.

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