

Words: 568

Title: Unfurling the Black, Red and Gold

Subtitle: Germany has been struggling to bring back its patriotism and to finally “lay the ghost of Nazism”

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Photo: Use German Flag 2.jpg

For a country whose mere mention provokes the thought of Adolf Hitler even 60 odd years after World War II, it is no wonder why Germany lacks national pride.

There is an engrained fear of showing even the mildest affinity towards Germany; public patriotism is simply a taboo. The national anthem is not played in schools, and thus most German students do not know the words. Unlike the mini Canadian flags proudly fluttering in the wind on the peaks of downtown Toronto hotels, insurance companies and banks, Germany’s black, red and gold tricolour is a rare sight—one of the only at the Reichstag. In 2004, when current president Horst Köhler said, in his speech, “I love Germany”, Reuters reported that the sentence “sent a hush through the packed Reichstag chamber.”

The lack of nationalism may be difficult to comprehend for the patriotic Canadian. But even more incomprehensible are the many outdated Canadian perceptions of Germany. Canadian schools have little exposure to Germany outside of a grade nine history textbook, and recent media spectacles of outlandish and controversial individuals of German descent do not help.

For example, last February, the media covered the German court trial of neo-Nazi Ernst Zundel who was convicted to five years in prison for denying that Nazis murdered six million Jews in the Holocaust. In 2005, the media blathered on about the trial of the German cannibal who advertised his fantasies on the internet and found a willing participant.

More important was the positive media coverage of the World Cup 2006 depicting a modern, united Germany. With Germany placed third, beyond all expectations, World Cup was able to revive the long dormant German national spirit. Germans regained a reason to be patriotic.

But there again they faced the fear of patriotism. This was a global event that would be televised across the world. “There was a niggle in German patriotism,” Michael Faul, head of UK’s Flag Institute said in a BBC report. “If they show the flag will they be seen as Nazis? If they can overcome it and show they can be patriotic in a positive way, that will help lay this ghost of Nazism.”

Showing national pride gradually became more natural and out unfurled the long lost black, red and gold. Flags were draped over windows and painted on faces, German garlands and paraphernalia were selling in the streets, and citizens adorned black-red-gold shirts, hats, ornaments—and patriotism. The stigma of national pride that was long self-imposed gradually slipped away from the German mindset.

The flag’s colours technically have little to do with World War II. Black, red, and gold originally symbolized the fraternity of revolutionaries in 1848 who fought for democracy and unity of Germany. After it was officially adopted by the end of WWI, Hitler replaced the flag in favour of the swastika. Although the flag was readopted in West Germany by

1949, Germans remained reserved about its use. At the World Cup, it seemed that Germany was flying its black-red-gold standard more than any other modern time.

With the reunification of Germany in the 1990s, and a positive patriotism in the making, perhaps the burden of history may finally be shed from the German mindset. Black, red, and gold may once again symbolize fraternity and unity of Germany, and just as Germany embraced the world during the World Cup, perhaps world audiences can also finally embrace modern day Germany.