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Prime Minister ⁽²⁾ CCPC
Per Mfoneti
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

29 May 1985

Dear Charles,

40th Anniversary: Sir J Bullard's Despatch of 21 May

/ The Foreign Secretary thinks that the Prime Minister will be interested to read Sir Julian Bullard's vivid despatch of 21 May entitled 'The 40th Anniversary of the end of the war in Europe: 8 May 1985'.

It was clear well in advance that the 40th anniversary would be a major foreign policy preoccupation for the Germans, once the Russians linked their revanchism campaign to the anniversary. In the event, public attention focussed more on the debate within the Federal Republic itself on the meaning of the anniversary, a debate sharpened by Bitburg, where Chancellor Kohl incurred a debt to President Reagan which is yet to be redeemed.

Yours ever,

Colin Budd

(C R Budd)
Private Secretary

C D Powell Esq
10 Downing Street

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THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE WAR IN EUROPE: 8 MAY 1985

Summary

1. The 40th anniversary caught public imagination in the FRG as elsewhere. The spate of memories were accompanied by powerful emotions and difficult questions about the Nazi past. Some answers took startling forms. (Paras 1-6)
2. Bitburg gave the remembrance an international dimension. Chancellor Kohl wanted a gesture of reconciliation with the US. His mistake was to think that the Nazi period had receded far enough to be no longer painful to contemplate. (Paras 7-8)
3. President von Weizsäcker's statesmanlike speech on 8 May did much to restore the balance. But Kohl's blunder on Bitburg has put him in Reagan's debt. The bill will inevitably come in. Bitburg has again made US/FRG relations a matter for party controversy. It has also led to the re-emergence of the small Jewish community in the FRG. They are entitled to warn at any sign of history repeating itself but the results may not always be helpful to them or to Israel. Despite the anniversary guilt remains less of a factor in German international relations. (Paras 9-11)
4. Yet the 40th anniversary has shown the Germans still in search of a comfortable identity within their post-1945 boundaries. 40 years has proved too short a time to allow the past to be forgotten. Those handling the celebrations in 1995 should approach them with more circumspection than happened in the FRG this time. (Para 12)



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BRITISH EMBASSY,
BONN.

21 May 1985

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign &
Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
London

Sir,

THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE WAR IN EUROPE: 8 MAY 1985

1. Now that the smoke has cleared away, I offer some thoughts on the recent anniversary of VE Day, as seen from the capital of the larger of the two German states which have replaced the Third Reich.
2. "It's hard to say who wanted it to happen" - Philip Larkin's line, written about the British decision to withdraw from east of Suez, could be applied to this anniversary. The number 40, though of Semitic significance, does not usually attract special commemoration. Was it President Mitterrand who started the process with his invitation to Sovereigns and Presidents to join him on the beaches of Normandy last June? Or was it the Russians, clutching at the Great Patriotic War as the one undeniable success in the history of their country since the Revolution, and as a stick to beat the Germans? Whoever began it, the idea caught on.

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The D-Day broadcasts captured the public imagination here as elsewhere: German leaders were not invited, but German tourists flooded the car parks. From then on the creeping barrage of anniversaries moved steadily across the continent. In my first eight months in this post I was able to relive the last eight months of the war which I had loosely been aware of as a boy of 16 and 17, my main interest at that time having been in the question whether the fighting would still be in progress in March 1946, when it would have been my turn.

3. In the FRG, the orgy of remembrance took very public forms. The television showed hundreds of hours of old newsreel punctuated with interviews with survivors, some poignant, some shocking. Local newspapers chimed in with "I was there" stories. This Embassy received invitations, in much greater numbers than we could accept, to ceremonies of all kinds all over the place. Hamburg commemorated its liberation by the British army, Hildesheim its destruction by the Royal Air Force, Remagen the capture of its famous railway bridge, and so on, all the way to Berlin. At the more famous sites, like Belsen, there was a second and a third ceremony organised by groups who thought they had not got enough of a look-in the first time. The SPD in particular wanted to commemorate their own resistance heroes, put to death by the hundred by Hitler before ever Stauffenberg planted his bomb on 20 July 1944. Some time in the middle of all this, the German government had to decide on the shape of its official ceremonies. The very clear line taken by

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the British Government, and particularly by the Prime Minister at her meeting with Chancellor Kohl in January, will have helped to steer them in what turned out to be a wise direction. But this was accomplished with many glances over the shoulder at what might be going to happen in Paris, in Reims, in Warsaw, at Auschwitz, in Moscow and especially in East Berlin.

4. This flood of reminiscences threw up many details that I had forgotten. At the time I had not understood the scale of destruction in Germany: twice as much during the last year of the war as in the previous four, tens of thousands of dead in Dresden alone and every village war memorial carrying at least as long a list of names for 1939-45 as for 1914-18. Then there was the fanaticism which produced so many summary executions and suicides, even in the final days. Last month a judge, giving judgement in a minor war crimes trial which happened to reach its end about the time of the anniversary, awarded a reduced sentence on account of the circumstances prevailing at the time, especially "the reduced threshold of reluctance to take life". In other words, life had become cheap in 1945 on the German side after so much dying. And I must add the individual courage and sense of duty shown by so many Germans long after the situation had become hopeless - for example, the U-boat commander who sank two last ships in the harbour at Costanza, scuttled his boat in the Black Sea and set out with his crew on foot across the Anatolian plateau to look for a Greek island which might still be in German hands.

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5. The spate of memories was accompanied by powerful emotions. There is a kind of tap in the German psyche which gushes strongly when turned on. This happened in 1979 when the American TV film "Holocaust" was first shown in this country. It happened again this year. Often the emotional battle raged round a point which was historical in form, though highly political in content. Did the root of Nazism lie in the Treaty of Versailles? Should the Allies have resisted Hitler by force when he occupied the Rheinland, or at Bad Godesberg, or at Munich? What if the Allies had not adopted the policy of unconditional surrender? How much did the German people know about the concentration camps? What kind of resistance against Hitler was possible, and why was there not more of it? Was Yalta a mistake, and could the loss of Central and Eastern Europe to communism have been avoided?

6. Some of the answers took startling forms. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a paper with some sinister characteristics behind its classic layout, printed an article by an international lawyer arguing that in accordance with the doctrine of condign retaliation the Allies should have called off the air attack on Germany round about 1942, when they had dropped roughly as many tons of bombs on this country as Germany had dropped on Britain. The same paper later carried a commentary, unsigned, suggesting that the revelations about the concentration camps were as great a surprise to the German people as to the Allies. Dregger, the CDU Parliamentary floor leader, wrote a letter to American senators in which he came close to presenting Hitler's invasion of Russia as an honourable crusade - a view which indeed I have

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heard him express. And from over the border in East Berlin, as Mr Everard has described, came interpretations of history that were even more grotesquely slanted in the other direction, accompanied by the same torchlight processions and other theatrical tricks as Hitler used to such good effect.

7. What gave this historical-political-emotional argument an extra twist and an international dimension was of course Bitburg. It seems to have been during his visit to Washington last November that Kohl, exhilarated by the public response to a photograph of him and Mitterrand holding hands at Verdun, made the fateful suggestion that a similar act of public reconciliation should form part of President Reagan's State Visit to Germany the following spring. For the historian which he claims to be, Kohl overlooked quite a lot: that 40 years is not the same thing as 70 years; that the moral character of the two world wars was different; that Bitburg lies close to the scenes of the heaviest fighting between German and American troops, in which American prisoners of war were massacred; that no Americans are buried there, as there were French at Verdun; and that 49 of the graves at Bitburg carried the letters SS. The American press, echoing the Jewish and Veterans' lobbies, did the rest. By a further master-stroke of public relations, the presidential visit to Bitburg was brought into conjunction with the World Economic Summit and its following of 3000 journalists, Kohl having moved this event forward from the usual month of June so as to counter the expected Russian celebrations on 9 May and improve his party's

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chances in the regional elections the following Sunday. The results in those elections were the worst ever for the CDU, showing how spectacularly this game plan misfired. Nor did the eloquent political declaration from the Summit get the attention it deserved, being largely swamped by Bitburg.

8. The mistake Kohl made is one which I may have made myself in saying, in a despatch last year, that the Nazi period seemed to have receded far enough into the past to become no longer painful to contemplate in this country. The achievements of the Federal Republic are so impressive - the reconstruction, the trade figures, the Deutschmark and the mature democracy - that one forgets that these things rest on a crust which is only 40 years thick. Tread too heavily, and your foot goes through into a void where burn fires that are still surprisingly hot. Kohl should have known better, after his experience in Israel when he tried to explain that he had nothing to say about the Nazi period because he was only a boy at the time. And Reagan should have known better, since with a State Visit the principle "caveat viator" must apply.

9. Into this demoralised scene stepped the calm figure of President von Weizsäcker, with the speech described in my telegram numbers 468 and 469. If I do not enclose a full translation, it is because I understand that several hundred copies have been distributed by the FRG Embassy in London. Weizsäcker's message was that other circumstances had indeed

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played a part, but that Hitler and Germany were to blame for the war and for all its consequences, including those disagreeable to Germans. They knew more about concentration camps than they liked to admit, and they could have resisted Hitler more than most of them did. 8 May had been a day of liberation for Germany as well as for the rest of the world. Since then, Germans in the West had built a state to be proud of. But the Germans remained one people, and on both sides of the division they must heed the lessons of their own history. As I said in my telegrams, I found it a masterly speech, definitive and conclusive both politically and emotionally. This has also been the general verdict here, apart from one or two isolated voices from the extreme Right. The President will particularly have noted the warm reception in Israel, where he is to make a State Visit later this year.

Conclusions

10. To begin with the more obvious consequences, Kohl has made a major blunder, even if his manner at Chequers last weekend did not show much awareness of this. He may in future be slightly less blindly over-confident. More important, Kohl has put himself in Reagan's debt, more deeply than he has so far been able to repay. This is a cheque which the United States may want to cash at some time and in some form. And German relations with the United States have once again become a matter of party controversy. When Brandt flared up at Kohl on the television and compared the CDU Secretary-General Geissler to Goebbels, he was

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in a way confirming Kohl's jibe about his and his party's anti-americanism. But he was also blurting out his own resentment as a Social Democrat under Hitler and a member of the Norwegian Resistance, faced with the smooth heir of those who in 1933 took the other side.

11. Among more intangible consequences, I would mention the re-emergence of the Jewish community in this country. There are only 30,000 of them, including the largest community in West Berlin. But Belsen, Bitburg and the 40th anniversary generally gave this small community the opportunity to present itself as Germany's conscience, entitled and indeed required by history to raise a warning finger at the slightest sign that events might be in danger of repeating themselves. If this is going to be their stance, I am not convinced that the results will always be helpful to the German Jews, or to Israel either. Some people in this country, having seen the Jewish lobby in the United States manipulate the American press and political institutions in an anti-German cause, may revert to anti-Semitism in a form which has for obvious reasons been taboo since the war. I would therefore not want to withdraw the other comment I made in the despatch of last autumn already quoted, about guilt being less of a factor in German international relations than it had been some years ago. But the Jewish community in Germany has certainly put itself on the map and it will try to stay there.

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12. As a final thought, these last weeks have confirmed my view of the Germans as people still shifting restlessly in search of a comfortable identity within their post-1945 boundaries. It was a painful moment for them when the House of Representatives in Washington voted by a large majority to urge the President to cancel his visit to Bitburg, leading Kohl to ask whether, in the eyes of the United States, the FRG represented first and foremost a reliable partner and ally or the children and grandchildren of Nazis. At times recently there have been traces of the "wir-Gefühl" (literally "We-feeling") which carried German bombers to Coventry and German troops to Athens and the outskirts of Moscow. But from 9 May onwards the light of common day has shone again, those regional elections quickly displacing everything else on the front pages. My conclusion is therefore a banal one: that 40 years has proved to be much too short a time to allow the events of the Nazi period to be forgotten, or treated unemotionally. Another ten years will make a lot of difference, for obvious demographic reasons. But I would still advise those handling these matters in 1995 to approach the date with more circumspection than happened in the Federal Republic this time.

13. I am sending copies of this despatch to HM Ambassadors at Washington, Paris, NATO, Moscow, Warsaw, East Berlin, Prague, Tel Aviv, Vienna, the British Commandant in Berlin, the Commanders in Chief at Rheindahlen and the British Consul-General in the Federal Republic.

I am Sir,
Yours faithfully

J L Bullard

J L Bullard