



THE OPINION PAGES | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Does Germany Need a New Flag?

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Jochen Bittner

BERLIN — If national flags could speak, most of them would have a strong opinion.

The American Stars and Stripes would say something like: “Yeah, folks, I know, some of you think I’m a promise; some believe I’m a broken promise. But what remains is the promise, right?”

Britain’s Union Jack would state: “I am utterly aware of the fact that our once global empire is vanished and gone. Yet I am hip. Use me as your iPhone cover or wear me as a bikini. Cool Britannia is fine with it.”

The German flag would have to think awhile. Then it would propose: “Get me now at your nearest discount supermarket as part of the World Cup fan package, with a six-pack of beer and a Brazilian thunderer whistle for only 6.95 euros!”

That’s the sad reason I would never fly the German flag. It’s not that I’m unpatriotic. It’s that our flag’s branding is so spoiled. Can we have a new one, please?

Our flag doesn’t get out much. The black, red and gold banner is used either extremely officially, like the ones over the Reichstag, or extremely unofficially, as a cover for your car mirror during the World Cup.

In fact, outside official functions, the only place you’ll see it flying in Germany is in allotment gardens, the small plots tucked along railroad rights of way, tended by the sort of Germans who wear socks with their sandals.

Perhaps that’s a snobbish stereotype, but it’s a widely held one. When I asked a friend if he would ever fly a German flag, he grimaced and said, “No way! That flag is a ‘Spiesser-Symbol’” — “Spiesser” being one of those

untranslatable German words that roughly means petty bourgeois, small-minded; “Babbitt” comes closest to the mark.

In contrast, Germans who regard themselves as liberal, educated and responsible to our country’s past view the flag as a specious symbol of nationalism, which is of course the most feared among the German vices.

Last September, when the final polls came in showing that Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats had won the national election, the party’s secretary general started waving a little German flag, while singing along to a pop song. The chancellor spotted him and, with a disapproving expression, took the flag from him and stuck it somewhere in a corner of the room.

Given the German flag’s problematic brand, I started a little survey among my non-German friends. Should we redesign it? And if so, what would a fresh, unmortgaged German flag look like?

Part of the problem with our flag is that most foreigners, even ones who know a thing or two about Germany, don’t get the depth of discord surrounding it. An Irish friend took issue with the question itself: “Germany has only been using the current one in any noteworthy way since the 2006 World Cup,” which it hosted. “It would be environmentally irresponsible to create a new flag: Think of all that cheap black-red-gold polyester ending up in the landfills.”

But that’s my whole point, I said. That’s how we treat our flag — polyester might as well be the national fabric! My Irish friend didn’t understand. He slunk away while jokingly proposing, as an alternative, the black-and-white Prussian flag.

Next I asked a French friend. He looked at me as he often does when we talk about our countries: as if I had gone mad. He also reminded me of the legendary World Cup in Germany in 2006, the so-called Sommermärchen, when the cities were more or less covered in black-red-gold — and no one took offense.

Again, the details: To make ourselves comfortable with such a display, we Germans had to invent a new term: “party-otismus,” in contrast to, and in parody of, “patriotismus.” So what are we talking about? A flag of revelers, nothing more.

O.K., the French friend conceded, if you want to redesign it, you should do it along the corporate colors that many German banks use for their

websites: green and blue, the embodiment of seriousness and reliability. He wasn't being ironic.

The same color proposal came from a friend in Ukraine, although with a different reasoning. "I would suggest you use a green stripe" — the color of Islam — "instead of the black, so that your Turkish citizens get their share at last."

A philosopher friend from Italy said he would go for blue-white-black: European blue for Germany's central role on the Continent, and black and white as reference to Prussia, as well as to the "extremes of German history": black for the Second World War and white being the combination of the rainbow colors, as a "symbol of multicultural integration."

All good suggestions, and a bit sobering. Then I got a comforting email from America.

It was sent by an assistant professor of German in Wisconsin, and it read: "I don't think your problem can be solved — nor should it. A certain uneasiness belongs to a 'Kulturnation'" — another untranslatable but very important word that denotes a country with more or less a single, unified culture. "Maybe we're all allotment gardeners at the end of the day. With the only question being how big the garden is."

That is a beautiful thought. And it makes you remember the origin of the German flag: It was first used by the revolutionaries in the 19th century who fought bitterly for a united nation.

All right then. Maybe I'd better try to make my garden fit my flag, instead of the other way around.

Jochen Bittner is a political editor for the weekly newspaper Die Zeit.

Correction: June 20, 2014

An earlier version of the summary with this article misstated one of the colors of the German flag. The flag is black, red and gold. Not black, yellow and gold.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 20, 2014, in The International New York Times.