

# Painful lessons of history thwart Europe's ambitions

*Denis Collins, an assistant professor of business ethics at UW-Madison's Graduate School of Business, attended several European Community briefings this summer, as part of the Third Annual Conference of the International Association for Business and Society. Here is his assessment of Europe's move toward unification.*

**By Denis Collins**

A political revolution is under way in Europe, one that is shockingly utopian, yet practical. At this point, it is unclear how many of the European nations invited to be part of this great democratic experiment to form a unified economic, political and military system actually will join. All of them ought to join, and many, if not all, will.

Yet caution struck the millennial tide when, despite a unified effort among the political elites to convince people of the obvious logic of this proposal, the citizens of Denmark thumbed their noses at the European Community bureaucrats.

Many of the recent political writings have wrongly applied economic analysis in trying to understand why the Danes said no, the Irish said yes, and all other invited nations may say no, yes or maybe.

Predictions of national decisions ought to be based upon historical analysis in addition to economic analysis. Many Danes like the idea of a common market. What they, in particular the older Danes, don't like is the idea of forgiving Germany its transgressions. For Europeans born before 1950, World War II was yesterday, World War I was two days ago, Napoleon was three days ago and the German barbarians sacked Rome just last week. According to these people, Germany should not be trusted.

To fully understand the power of these common sentiments, and the obstacles they create, one need only talk to people walking on the streets of Brussels and other Euro-

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pean cities and towns. Their stories must be heard and integrated into policy analysis if the European Community is to achieve the success that it rightly deserves.

For instance, one 52-year-old Belgian hotel clerk spoke clearly about his first memory: cows lying on their backs and exploding from the effects of a German bomb that had landed on his family's farm.

His father readily recalls a sunny afternoon when he was captured during a sneak attack by Germans, abused on a train to Poland, tortured in a prisoner-of-war camp, enslaved and dehydrated. When he was no longer of any use to the German war strategy, he was transported back to Belgium, where, somewhere within the German borders, he recalls passing a train full of Jews heading west.

In their minds, these events just took place. Although they try hard to forget, young Europeans cannot escape the haunting German history.

For instance, in Leuven, Belgium, two swastikas were prominently displayed on brick walls. One appeared around the corner from Leuven's grandiose university library. Nearby residents attributed the swastika either to German youths who attended a soccer game or to local Belgian hooligans acting as hooligans tend to act — following the examples of the most despicable degenerates.

A second swastika appeared on the wall opposite the University of Leuven's Economics Department. Next to it was one word: "Turkey." Several university students nearby had no explanation for the meaning of the graffiti. Although the graffiti had been on the wall for at least a week, they hadn't even noticed it.

An elderly store owner thought

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# Europe's common dilemma

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the message was obvious: Turkey, which wants to be a member of the European Community, has an imperialist history and consists of people who practice a foreign religion. After all, one shouldn't forget about the spread of Islam during the Middle Ages.

The third imperial power worth noting for many Europeans is Japan, one of Germany's World War II partners.

Interestingly, Europeans believe that Americans are silly to try to compete with Japan. Competition with Japan requires modeling certain Japanese cultural attributes, attributes that many Europeans believe ought to be held up to public condemnation and ridicule. The Japanese are seen as being unsocial. All they do is work. Japan is a place that, to put it mildly, has ridiculously long working days, overemphasizes academic and material accomplishments, and consists of an overabundance of zombielike train riders.

This European view says Japan's one-minded, narrow focus is likely to yield a pyrrhic victory. Japan may succeed in the short-term, which to many Europeans could mean up to 60 years, but it will lose in the long-term because sooner or later its citizens and/or children will rebel against a society that intentionally suffocates factors that foster individual and group creativity and liberty.

For the time being, the Germans are the primary focus of much European animosity. Germans are stereotyped as being arrogant, obstinate, overly efficiency-oriented and regimentally disciplined. They manage diversity by making everyone like everyone else.

According to one young, well-

traveled international consultant, all of this is exemplified by the manner in which Germans insist upon neatly placing chairs in their proper position after leaving a table.

Thus, many Europeans have concluded that the Germans intentionally would increase inflation, economically strangle the poorer, non-Aryan European nations and engage in a hostile takeover of the European Community.

The recent reunification of Germany generated an ambiguous collective sigh. On the positive side, the former West Germans were forced into focusing on the domestic problems of East Germany rather than on their own imperialistic tendencies. On the negative side, German reunification demonstrated that nation's imperialist tendencies.

Many Europeans seem to trust German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The question on their hearts, minds and tongues is who will succeed him.

In this sense, the success of the European Community rests with the younger generation of Germans, just as it also rests with the younger generation of all Europeans. Being modern means rebelling against cynicism and skepticism. It is old-fashioned to hate one another, to hate the Germans and to be obsessed with past and future Adolf Hitlers.

This general rule has some exceptions. Many European citizens fear those young Germans who are grotesquely fascinated by Hitler and Nazi history. These xenophobic youth appeal to hooligans living in other European countries.

Despite the German fear, many citizens want European unification to succeed. Leadership in negotiating a unified economic system, political system and military system rests, for the most part, in the hands of the Germans and French. To many Europeans, it is Hitler sitting with Napoleon.

Many Europeans have aligned themselves with the French. They are convinced that the French, because to their own Napoleonic, imperial inclinations, would not accept a set of rules that could allow the Germans to take control of the European Community. The potential key role of the Swiss serving as a neutral party in European negotiations is a non-issue. The influence

of Moscow on European politics is also a contemporary non-issue.

However, fighting in Yugoslavia is an issue and, because of conflicting national interests, could ignite bickering among European Community members. According to EC leaders, the need for a unified European foreign policy and military is accentuated by Europe's inability to determine and act upon a correct course of action for the Yugoslavs.

As for the European Community's practical utopians, the project moves on. They believe that a modern-day Hitler could be more easily contained under a European parliament than under the current segregated political system.

Thus, the Irish voted appropriately. If some current members of the European Community do not want to join the party, then so be it. Any vacant spots could be filled with Scandinavian nations or any of the emerging eastern European nations.

So long as membership to the common economic market is voluntary, rather than imposed, many of these nations would appreciate inclusion.

We are living during one of those rare, apocalyptic, historical moments. Eternal pessimism, based on uncontroverted historical evidence on how we humans can sometimes ridiculously brutalize each other, is counterbalanced by eternal optimism, also based on uncontroverted historical evidence on how we humans can sometimes sincerely embrace each other.

Hopefully, the chances of Germany taking control of the European Community will match the track record of either the United States or Soviet Union taking control of the United Nations: nil.

But rather than relying upon faith, politicians and public policy makers must establish protective institutional and contractual mechanisms that can be explainable to local citizens. These citizens are not primarily concerned with agricultural subsidies. Nor are they primarily concerned about overpaid EC bureaucrats driving limousines, wearing fancy clothes and eating fancy dinners, then demanding a tax of 5 percent to 15 percent to support their habits.

They are primarily concerned with European history and national stereotypes.