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Prize of the Peace of Westphalia 2012

Thank-you speech by former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt

I would like to sincerely thank the jury and the Board of Trustees of the Wirtschaftliche Gesellschaft für Westfalen-Lippe for the award. I would also like to thank Dr. Zinkann for his kind words. Above all, I would like to congratulate the "Children for a better world" association as the prize winner. They help children and young people all over the world to overcome their emergency situations and improve their living conditions. Peaceful children are the future of us all. And peacemaking children are the peaceful future of us all. With your commitment and your work, you can become a peacemaker in the world of tomorrow. For in the spirit of Immanuel Kant, peace among us is possible, but peace must be "established" again and again.

I

I consider the Peace of Westphalia Prize to be an unexpected honor. Historically, the Peace of Münster and Osnabrück was an important contribution to legal order and peace in Europe. This order - with restrictions and violations! - lasted for a century and a half.

In Catholic Münster and Protestant Osnabrück, the states and powers of Europe negotiated for five years before proclaiming the Peace of Westphalia in October 1648. It marked the end of the most devastating war that had ever been fought. It began as a war for faith and power: Emperor Ferdinand against the followers of Luther, the Habsburg hegemonic power against its European neighbors. Until then, Europe had been dominated by the Habsburgs, who had been Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation for two centuries. But now Emperor Ferdinand had turned all of his most important European neighbors against him with his aggressive warfare against the Protestant countries in the empire.

In the end, French interests and Swedish interests in particular had to be satisfied. Along the way, peace was established between Spain and the Netherlands; along the way, the sovereignty of the Confederation was recognized; along the way, the dispute over the Alsace, the Palatinate, the imperial estates and imperial cities were settled. The Peace of Westphalia legally established peace between the religious confessions. At the same time, the peace went hand in hand with the establishment of international law for the first time.

All in all, this was also evidence of the slow disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire. This empire came to its definitive end a century and a half later in 1803/1806, after another war had affected almost all of Europe. A century and a half after the Peace of Westphalia, it was superseded by the Congress of Vienna.

The Congress of Vienna was also unable to preserve peace in Europe. After just half a century, the Prussian-German-French War broke out; and after another half century, the First World War broke out. This was followed by the Peace of Versailles and the founding of the League of Nations, which was unsuccessful.

Just 20 years later, Hitler triggered the Second World War. It became even more terrible, with much more blood! The terrible climax was the murder of six million Jewish fellow citizens. Whether Auschwitz or Yad Vashem - the world will not forget. Nor has it really forgotten the Babylonian captivity more than two millennia ago.

The Second World War was followed in 1945 by the founding of the United Nations - including the Security Council with five veto powers. A thoroughly imperfect institution. Nevertheless, the UN was able to prevent the worst - or was it rather the balance of power of the two alliances that were able to wipe each other out?

The serious violations of all the peace treaties recalled were manifold. And they were almost universal. This is particularly true of the Geneva Conventions of 1864 to 1949, with their clear distinction between military and civilians. They were increasingly violated from the very beginning and ultimately in the most egregious manner.

During this entire period, Japan has only played an increasing role since the end of the 19th century. However, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan only appeared in world history as victims of European colonialism; the same applies to Brazil and Argentina.

II

The history of Europe over the last four centuries can be interpreted as a continuing conflict between international law and power. I prefer to speak instead of a continuing conflict between center and periphery. When the center was weak, the peripheral powers advanced into the center. When the center was strong, as in Napoleonic times and especially in Hitler's time, the war led to catastrophe.

Prussia/Germany as the center proved to be too weak in 1914/18 and again in 1939/45. This is why the USA and later the Soviet Union rose to power after 1914. Until the very late 1980s, however, the balance of power and the Cold War kept European relations reasonably stable.

However, the situation in 1990 was characterized by the fact that both France and England did not trust the Germans to remain peaceful in the long term. Both states did not want to agree to the unification of Germany - they might also have wanted the continuation of the tutelage of the peoples of Eastern Central Europe. We have the United States of America to thank for the fact that it was possible to overcome this opposition to unification in 1990, and we also have the Soviet leadership of the time to thank.

But the doubts of the French, the English and many other Europeans remain: Have the Germans really changed? Has Germany really learned? I want to come back to this question. First, however, we must talk about the explosion of the world's population in the course of the twentieth century.

III

Unfortunately, Europeans have not yet realized that humanity will increase from one and a half billion in 1900 to nine billion by 2050. Unfortunately, Europeans have also not realized that all European peoples have been subject to a process of shrinkage over the last 50 years - and at the same time an ageing process. At the same time, however, the formerly so-called developing countries, also known as emerging countries, have experienced an explosion in their populations. We are also experiencing a huge economic rise of the former colonies in Asia, South America, Africa and especially China.

This rise goes hand in hand with a huge acceleration in technological development. The electronization of money and capital movements has led to an unforeseen increase in the power of financial centers; these private financial centers have become the main causes of today's European disorder. At the same time, we are faced with a near-global conflict over raw materials of all kinds, especially energy resources, and consequently a global conflict over global warming and the means to mitigate it.

The Cold War had obscured the fundamental changes in the world for over half a century. However, the European peoples and their states, their national economies and all businesses are affected by all these developments in the strongest possible way - they just don't know it yet.

IV

The European Union has been evolving for more than half a century. It began in 1952 with six member states. 40 years later, in Maastricht, we were still only 12 European member states. Today we are 27 members, because more and more members have joined in recent years. In contrast, we have not been able to make any effective institutional progress, neither in Maastricht, nor with the failed attempt at a European constitution, nor with the Lisbon Treaties. The Brussels Commission has 20,000 capable employees, but they are occupied with secondary tasks. Only the European Central Bank functions satisfactorily. One possibility must therefore be clearly stated today: The European Union may well fail.

It could also fail because of the Germans! To the great surprise of many Germans, the Federal Republic of Germany is proving to be the strongest economic power on the continent. And it is making the other member states feel it! The German Federal Constitutional Court, the Bundesbank and, before that, Chancellor Merkel, are acting as the center of Europe. And unfortunately, part of public opinion in Germany today is characterized by a national-egoistic view.

V

As an old man, you think in the long term. I think it is possible that the European states will return to their old power games between the center and the periphery - without realizing that they themselves are moving to the outer fringes of world politics and the world economy. And this despite the fact that two of the European states are nuclear powers, as is North Korea. Nuclear weapons are badges of power and rank, they are tools of threat and war. Economically and socially, they are a waste of productivity. The fact that Germany is not allowed to maintain a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines is one of several reasons for our relative prosperity.

We Germans have realized that we Europeans must not return to the old game of balancing the European powers. But beyond that, I believe that Germany must finally draw the necessary positive conclusions from the last four centuries, namely these:

Firstly, historical experience has taught European nations and their political leaders: all previous attempts to establish a strong central power in Europe have failed. They would therefore also be doomed to failure in the future. Attempts to enable the European Union to act in foreign, economic, financial and security policy through treaties and legislation have also so far been unlikely to succeed.

Secondly, in this situation, the Germans must remember Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle. They must remember George Marshall, George Kennan, Harry Truman and George Bush father. These were statesmen who helped us Germans. We must finally return the favor.

And that means: we must not only be advocates of the European Union. We must go far beyond that and act proactively.

Article 23.1 of the German Basic Law paves the way. Of course, this will cost a lot of money from Germany, but why have we been the main winner of the European integration process since 1952?

Thirdly, whatever lessons are to be learned from the history of recent centuries, we Germans must never, ever be the cause of stagnation, decay - or even disintegration - of the great project of the European Union. After all, almost the entire world in the other four continents is waiting impatiently for the old Europeans to finally act as a union with one voice. This includes the unconditional will to cooperate with the French - and secondly, the will to cooperate unconditionally with the Poles. And thirdly, the will to cooperate with all our other neighbors.

Finally, I would like to return to the question of whether Germany has changed and whether we have learned. I would like to answer this question of fate in the affirmative. But we can only prove this if we draw the consequences loudly and clearly.