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# Blinded by Bias

## Chapter 6 | A Friendship Betrayed: Germany

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# A Friendship Betrayed: Germany

During the crisis, Germany's persistent efforts to deescalate tensions through diplomatic channels was rooted in its geographic location in *Mitteleuropa*, close economic ties to Russia, and inclination to maintain relations with Russia informed by its *Ostpolitik*. Germany continued to adhere to longstanding policies of *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade'). Combined with a pacifist streak in its foreign policies, it favoured dialogue with Russia until the final moment. Heavily dependent on Russian energy, the German leadership advocated for the peaceful resolution of the crisis, whilst failing to grasp the nature of Putin's expansionist ambitions.

This approach to the crisis presents Germany as a 'Dove' state, exemplified by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's statement: "*Putin did not threaten me or Germany*," implying that Russia was not an existential threat to Germany in the lead-up to the crisis.<sup>1</sup> German officials misinterpreted Russia's moves in the run-up to the invasion and ultimately failed to assess its imminency. Germany's response to the crisis was thereby limited to the signalling of its willingness to impose economic sanctions, while dismissing the possibility of military support upfront.

## A German-Russian Love Story

In the period 1991-2014, Germany's approach towards Russia featured a consistent attempt to strengthen German-Russian relations, support democratic reform within Russia, and integrate it within a wider European security architecture, an approach informed by its own history of successful integration after the Second World War and the Cold War. Against the background of this triple ambition, successive German governments overlooked blatant infringements of the rule of law and criminalisation of the Russian economy, Germany's *Ostpolitik* prevailing.<sup>2</sup> Striving for peaceful coexistence, it elevated policies of *Wandel durch Annäherung* ('change through rapprochement') and *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade') to create cultural, political and economic links with Russia. These ties fostered interdependence, with the goal of promoting democracy and turning Russia into a "responsible stakeholder [...] in the international system."<sup>3</sup> In this process, Germany became very much dependent on Russia's considerable fossil fuel deposits. For instance, one-third of Germany's energy imports came from Russia in 2011 and in 2020, as Germany was importing more than

<sup>1</sup> Angelika Hellemann and Alexandra Würzbach, 'Olaf Scholz im BamS-Interview: Klimakleber? Viele schütteln den Kopf. Ich auch', *Bild*, 5 February 2023, <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/olaf-scholz-im-bams-interview-klimakleber-viele-schuettern-den-kopf-ich-auch-82789486.bild.html>.

<sup>2</sup> John Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', in *Germany's Russia Problem: The Struggle for Balance in Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2021), 109–11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1rm25gx.8>.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Kundnani, 'Why Ostpolitik Is Needed Right Now', *International Politics and Society*, 11 July 2024, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/why-ostpolitik-is-needed-right-now-7645/>.

half of its natural gas from Russia.<sup>4</sup> Germany was also a key partner in the development of Nord Streams 1 and 2 while former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder took a well-paid position on the project's board after he left office.<sup>5</sup> During his time as chancellor, Schröder actively promoted closer ties with Russia, controversially describing Putin as a 'flawless democrat'.<sup>6</sup> Germany consistently sought to develop closer and deeper ties with Russia, pushing for its membership in the Council of Europe in 1996 and the G7 in 1997. In the 1990s, Chancellor Kohl also voiced his concerns about NATO's enlargement which could isolate Russia and exacerbate its feeling of humiliation.<sup>7</sup> In 1993, he particularly shared his doubts in a phone conversation with US President Clinton about the potential NATO memberships of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland and their impact on NATO-Russia relations.<sup>8</sup>

Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich conference shocked German officials. German-Russian relationship continued to develop in the spirit of *Wandel durch Handel* policy, also under Chancellor Angela Merkel.<sup>9</sup> Merkel also advocated against Ukraine's accession to NATO in 2008, reasoning Russia would perceive it as a threat to its security interests. Meanwhile, Germany and Russia officially inaugurated the Nord Stream 1 pipeline in 2011 and started negotiating Nord Stream 2 in 2013.<sup>10</sup> The annexation of Crimea in 2014 exposed Putin's more offensive ambitions, also to German leaders who, if reluctantly, shifted course. Germany went along with the imposition of sanctions against Russia, while simultaneously keeping channels of communication open, seeking a negotiated settlement to the war in Eastern Ukraine together with France in the Normandy format, and refusing to send military support to Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

## Seeing is Not Believing

The Russian deployment of forces along Ukraine's borders in April 2021 was largely downplayed by German officials. "We were inclined to ignore it," shared a senior German official.<sup>12</sup> Germany did, however, ask Russia to remove its troops at the same time as the German Foreign Minister affirmed that stronger sanctions against Russia would not improve the escalating situation.<sup>13</sup> An official observed: "We were not so concerned with what was happening."

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Szabo, '4. Doing Business with Russia Inc.', in *Germany, Russia, and the Rise of Geo-Economics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 62, <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/collections/monograph-detail>; Christoph Halser and Florentina Paraschiv, 'Pathways to Overcoming Natural Gas Dependency on Russia — The German Case', *Energies* 15, no. 14 (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/en15144939>.

<sup>5</sup> Sylvie Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés: Comment Berlin et Paris Ont Laissé La Voie Libre à La Russie*, Stock (2023), 133; Szabo, '4. Doing Business with Russia Inc.', 71.

<sup>6</sup> Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 132; Angela Stent, 'Germany and Russia: Farewell to Ostpolitik?', *Survival* 64, no. 5 (2022): 30, 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2126194>.

<sup>7</sup> Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 115, 117, 118.

<sup>8</sup> Stephan Kieninger, 'The Helmut Kohl Transcripts: NATO Enlargement', Wilson Center, 26 February 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/helmut-kohl-transcripts-nato-enlargement>.

<sup>9</sup> Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 35–36.

<sup>10</sup> Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 143; Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Stent, 'Germany and Russia', 31; Marco Siddi, '7. Germany's Evolving Relationship with Russia: Towards a Norm-Based Ostpolitik?', in *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's Role in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 160–61, [https://www.academia.edu/24281656/Germanys\\_evolving\\_relationship\\_with\\_Russia\\_Towards\\_a\\_norm\\_based\\_Ostpolitik](https://www.academia.edu/24281656/Germanys_evolving_relationship_with_Russia_Towards_a_norm_based_Ostpolitik); Siddi, 'Germany's Evolving Relationship with Russia', 157, 167.

<sup>12</sup> Interview 43

<sup>13</sup> 'Germany Urges Russia to Reduce Troops near Ukraine', Deutsche Welle (DW), 8 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-urges-russia-to-reduce-troop-presence-near-ukraine/a-57134905>; 'Germany's Maas Opposes Tougher Russia Sanctions', Deutsche Welle (DW), 26 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-heiko-maas-opposes-tougher-russia-sanctions/a-57331505>.

"We were not so concerned with what was happening. We didn't imagine he [Putin] would go that far."

*We didn't imagine he [Putin] would go that far.*"<sup>14</sup> In the perceptions of these policymakers, Russia's buildup was part of a broader campaign of signalling its intent rather than preparing for crisis escalation.

Putin's subsequent July essay was similarly seen as part and parcel of the usual Russian repertoire. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the essay reflected Putin's usual *modus operandi* rather than signalling an intent to go to war.<sup>15</sup> "We thought it was historical nonsense," added the senior German official.<sup>16</sup> The same day as the publication, German and Ukrainian leaders met to discuss Nord Stream 2 and underlined the need to address Ukraine's energy security in the Normandy Format negotiations.<sup>17</sup> "At the time of the essay, we were still very much busy with the Minsk process. We tried to create a meeting of the Normandy format with the leaders present," stated the senior German official previously quoted.<sup>18</sup> As a result, Germany's focus on the Minsk Agreements and its existing economic ties with Russia, led German officials to believe that Putin was acting in the context of these agreements. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, war was not part of the German mindset and was thereby seen to be implausible.<sup>19</sup> The official also argued that this was partly due to the fact that there was a widespread belief Germany needed to coexist with Russia. While the prospect of war seemed unimaginable to German officials, Germany was conscious of the potential leverage Nord Stream would provide Russia. This is why, in July 2021, Germany signed an agreement with the US to impede any potential attempt by the Russians to weaponise energy through the pipeline against Ukraine and Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>20</sup> By September 2021, the construction of Nord Stream 2 was finished and in October, the German Economy Ministry declared that the pipeline would not constitute a threat to energy security, serving as a preliminary condition to complete the pipeline certification by the German authorities.<sup>21</sup>

Putin's second troop buildup stirred greater concern. This time, "It was taken seriously," mentioned a senior German official. German officials struggled but tried to understand Putin's intentions by comparing the buildup to previous events such as the July essay and the Munich speech which, as related by the senior German official, "was seen as very problematic".<sup>22</sup> Still, as stated by the same official: "The dominating sense [was] that he [Putin] wouldn't go that far."<sup>23</sup> A few days before starting his term in December 2021, incoming Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that any threat to Ukraine "would be an unacceptable situation".<sup>24</sup> He emphasised that states' sovereign borders were to be respected while emphasising the need to maintain dialogue. German concerns were expressed again at the end of December during a press

<sup>14</sup> Interview 43

<sup>15</sup> Interview 14

<sup>16</sup> Interview 43

<sup>17</sup> 'Merkel Reassures Ukraine on Gas Transit after Nord Stream 2', Deutsche Welle (DW), 12 July 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/nord-stream-2-angela-merkel-reassures-ukraine-on-gas-transit/a-58235808>.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 43

<sup>19</sup> Interview 14

<sup>20</sup> Simon Lewis and Andrea Shalal, 'U.S., Germany Strike Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Deal to Push Back on Russian "Aggression"', Energy, *Reuters*, 21 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-germany-deal-nord-stream-2-pipeline-draws-ire-lawmakers-both-countries-2021-07-21/>.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Nasr and Christoph Steitz, 'Certifying Nord Stream 2 Poses No Threat to Gas Supply to EU -Germany', *Reuters*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/certifying-nord-stream-2-is-no-threat-gas-supply-eu-german-ministry-2021-10-26/>; *Russia's Nord Stream 2 Natural Gas Pipeline to Germany Halted*, legislation (Congressional Research Service, 2022), 1, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11138>.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 43

<sup>23</sup> Interview 43

<sup>24</sup> 'Germany's Scholz Says Any Threat to Ukraine Unacceptable', Europe, *Reuters*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-parties-sign-new-start-coalition-deal-before-handover-power-2021-12-07/>.



conference, where the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called on Russia to use the Normandy format to negotiate de-escalation.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Putin continued to be perceived as unlikely to jeopardise the post-Second World War order, instead German officials viewed the military buildup as an act of coercion. *“You never pull that number of troops together without intentions. We saw it as coercion and pressuring,”* claimed the senior German official.<sup>26</sup> A full-scale invasion still continued to seem unfathomable in the eyes of decision-makers and their advisors. They applied their own notions of rationality onto Putin’s thinking about Russia’s interests and on that basis concluded that he would not invade, as the costs would be too high. As the senior German official observed: *“Everyone said it looks like he is going to attack but he has to be crazy to do it.”*<sup>27</sup>

## The Legacy of Ostpolitik

From December 2021 onwards, the US and the UK started sharing alarming intelligence elements revealing Putin’s intentions to launch an invasion. German officials were sceptical, remembering the 2003 Iraq intelligence mistake which hampered trust in US intelligence. In line with its pacifist inclination, the German intelligence services and the political leadership interpreted the intelligence differently than the US and insisted on avoiding crisis escalation through open dialogue. When the US and the UK doubled down on their intelligence diplomacy, warning for the attack’s imminency, it did affect the German debate behind the scenes at least to some extent. The senior German official observed that the Germans *“shifted to making a few preparations in case things went awry,”* but that *“Preparations were mostly on the economic front.”*<sup>28</sup> This was captured by German Minister of Economic Affairs Robert Habeck’s statement: *“Russia knows that crossing red lines would immediately trigger painful sanctions that have already been prepared.”*<sup>29</sup> He would later go on to reflect on this period, concluding that the West had been overly naive in the months leading up to the conflict, calling for a change in the predominantly pacifist culture in Germany and Europe as a whole.<sup>30</sup> Close business ties with Russia played a role too, however. The senior German official mentioned that: *“There was a very strong economic lobby [...] in the industry sector, especially on gas. Preparations on Nord Stream were underway.”*<sup>31</sup> This pressure from the economic sector may have further prompted a climate in which German officials dismissed the possibility of a full-scale invasion scenario which would impose enormous costs on the German economy.

While Germany believed these extensive trade relations in combination with diplomacy would prevent an attack on Ukraine, the situation deteriorated further. German Foreign Minister Baerbock visited Kyiv in January 2022 and stated that any Russian attack *“would have a high*

<sup>25</sup> ‘Rede der Bundesministerin des Auswärtigen, Annalena Baerbock’, Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 23 December 2021, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-der-bundesministerin-des-auswaertigen-annalena-baerbock--1993872>.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 43

<sup>27</sup> Interview 43

<sup>28</sup> Interview 43

<sup>29</sup> ‘Robert Habeck: “Russia Knows That Crossing Red Lines Would Immediately Trigger Painful Sanctions” - DER SPIEGEL’, accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-economy-minister-robert-habeck-russia-knows-that-crossing-red-lines-would-immediately-trigger-painful-sanctions-a-907de5d5-f0d6-41a1-ae4d-89c997d46434>.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Germany and Russia’s War of Aggression against Ukraine: The Third Year | DGAP’, accessed 4 April 2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/germany-and-russias-war-aggression-against-ukraine-third-year>.

<sup>31</sup> Interview 43

“Everyone said it looks like he is going to attack but he has to be crazy to do it.”

price", signalling Germany's willingness to impose sanctions on Russia *after* it would launch an attack.<sup>32</sup> Preventive sanctions, something Ukraine asked for, were not part of the punishment. As explained by the senior German official, the German government "*did not feel it was necessary to impose sanctions ahead of an attack*".<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, robust military support was not on the table. Initially, the German government announced it would not even send protective military equipment, although it later dispatched 5,000 helmets to Ukraine on 2 January 2022.<sup>34</sup> "*We don't provide any lethal weapons*," Chancellor Scholz still insisted in an interview at the end of January.<sup>35</sup> The German government vetoed Ukraine's purchase of NATO anti-drone rifles and anti-sniper systems and delayed its approval to send Estonian German-made howitzers.<sup>36</sup> Germany's reticence rooted in the legacy of the Second World War was codified by a policy commitment not to send weapons to war zones.<sup>37</sup> As the senior German official observed: "*It was not in our DNA to send anything militarily*."<sup>38</sup> Paraphrasing another senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this German pacifist mindset more broadly explains why no clearer deterrent threats were communicated in the months leading up to the invasion.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as the social democrats' spokesman Nils Schmidt added in January 2022: "*France and Germany are mediators and I think it's not very appropriate for a mediator nation to send weapons to Ukraine, to one conflict party, because we are trying to promote a diplomatic solution*."<sup>40</sup>

On 26 January, France hosted a meeting within the Normandy format, gathering parties for the first time since the last meeting in 2019. The meeting was received positively by Ukraine's Head of the President's Office, Yermak, characterising it as the "*reanimation of the Normandy format*".<sup>41</sup> The joint *communiqué* published at the end of the meeting expressed the parties' willingness to overcome differences in opinion through dialogue even if to some observers the results of the meeting largely favoured Russia as Ukraine was the only party making concessions.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>32</sup> 'Foreign Minister Baerbock in Kyiv and Moscow', Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 18 January 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/baerbock-ukraine-russia-1998934>.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 43

<sup>34</sup> David M. Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid', POLITICO, 26 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-russia-germany-still-blocking-arms-supplies/>.

<sup>35</sup> Frank Jordans, 'German Caution on Arms to Ukraine Rooted in History, Energy', Associated Press, 25 January 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-germany-estonia-europe-6355dfe-b69a3793d1a1a040e4d23b6c1>.

<sup>36</sup> Roman Olearchyk and Ben Hall, 'Ukraine Blames Germany for "Blocking" Nato Weapons Supply', *Financial Times* (London), 12 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/1336c9be-f1c9-4545-9f85-3b07fcb746d6>; Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid'.

<sup>37</sup> Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid'; Jordans, 'German Caution on Arms to Ukraine Rooted in History, Energy'.

<sup>38</sup> Interview 43

<sup>39</sup> Interview 14

<sup>40</sup> Jenny Hill, *Why Germany Isn't Sending Weapons to Ukraine*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60155002>.

<sup>41</sup> Yuliia Rudenko, 'Normandy Talks for Ukraine-Russia Conflict Resolution Resumed. Why Was It a Win for Russia?', Euromaidan Press, 27 January 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/01/27/normandy-talks-for-ukraine-russia-conflict-resolution-resumed-why-was-it-a-win-for-russia/>.

<sup>42</sup> Yuliia Rudenko, 'Normandy Talks for Ukraine-Russia Conflict Resolution Resumed. Why Was It a Win for Russia?', Euromaidan Press, 27 January 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/01/27/normandy-talks-for-ukraine-russia-conflict-resolution-resumed-why-was-it-a-win-for-russia/>.

## Caught Off Guard

During the final weeks prior to the onset of the war, Germany continued to try and de-escalate the crisis through diplomatic dialogue and the threat of sanctions. On 12 February 2022, representatives from Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia met in Berlin for what would become the last Normandy meeting. Parties agreed to renew the work of the Trilateral Contact Group involving Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE regarding a potential diplomatic resolution for the Donbas conflict. Other than this step, no significant progress was made after a difficult nine-hour discussion, and representatives failed to agree on a joint *communiqué*.<sup>43</sup> In this climate of growing tensions, the German Chancellor visited Kyiv on 14 February announcing support for Ukraine through the continuation of financial support.<sup>44</sup> The Chancellor visited Moscow the next day where he discussed the Russian deployments at the Ukrainian border and expressed his concerns. As one German official related, Scholz also met with Russian think tankers in an attempt to understand Putin's intentions—to no avail.<sup>45</sup> Chancellor Scholz stated that Germany “cannot see any sound reason for this buildup of troops” and called for responsible action from all parties to prevent war from returning in Europe.<sup>46</sup> “For my generation, war in Europe is now inconceivable – and we must ensure that it stays that way,” the chancellor added.<sup>47</sup>

After his Moscow visit, the German chancellor believed he had received assurances that the troops would be withdrawn. As the senior German official observed: “*The Russians have everything in place for an invasion. But the question is: how do you interpret this information? The US and UK assume he's going to act. But we see it slightly differently.*”<sup>48</sup> On the basis of this impression, Chancellor Scholz felt vindicated to further pursue a diplomatic route.<sup>49</sup> The US, however, pointed to the presence of a considerable number of Russian troops on the border.<sup>50</sup>

NATO allies, including Germany, were predominantly concerned with the security of NATO territory, even though some felt that NATO territory itself was not under immediate threat. As the senior German official explained: “*NATO was not directly affected. At the time there was simply a difference. Would Germany defend Poland? Yes. And Ukraine? No, because that is a different story.*”<sup>51</sup> *Vis-à-vis* Ukraine, however, Germany's approach was more of “*a dissuasive policy towards Russia and not really deterrent.*”<sup>52</sup> The German government continued to focus on diplomacy, also in these final weeks, clearly captured in the chancellor's statement while

<sup>43</sup> Yuliia Rudenko, ‘No Progress in Normandy Talks around Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Donbas’, Euromaidan Press, 11 February 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/02/11/no-progress-in-berlin-talks-around-russia-ukraine-conflict-in-donbas-normandy-format/>.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Federal Chancellor Scholz in Kyiv: Germany Stands Side by Side with Ukraine’, The Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 14 February 2022, <https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-en/news/federal-chancellor-scholz-ukraine-2005438>.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 43

<sup>46</sup> ‘Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow: Courageous Action Is the Order of the Day’, The Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 15 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/federal-chancellor-scholz-moscow-2005774>.

<sup>47</sup> Fed. Chancell. Fed. Repub. Ger., ‘Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow’.

<sup>48</sup> Phythian and Strachan-Morris, ‘Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War’.

<sup>49</sup> Steve Rosenberg, *Ukraine-Russia Tensions: Russia Pulls Some Troops Back from Border*, 15 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60386141>.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Smith, ‘U.S. Says Russia Lied about Pullback from near Ukraine, Is Sending in More Troops’, NBC News, 17 February 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraine-crisis-russia-troop-pullback-met-skepticism-west-ukraine-defia-rcna16435>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 43

<sup>52</sup> Interview 43

Germany's approach was more of a “dissuasive policy towards Russia and not really deterrent”.



in Moscow: “For us Germans—and indeed for all Europeans—it is clear that sustainable security cannot be achieved against Russia, only with Russia.”<sup>53</sup> Despite distrust in US intelligence and Germany’s resolve to find a diplomatic solution, the continued intelligence diplomacy on the part of the Five Eyes members raised some results, putting the German government on higher alert. The senior German official stated: “The 10% doubt that was there did not stop us from preparing. On 21 February, we prepared a statement for a rogue scenario. [...] It’s not that we completely ignored everything.”<sup>54</sup> The next day, with a very large Russian invasion force amassed along Ukraine’s borders, the German government finally halted the Nord Stream 2 certification process. Still then, the decision was heavily contested in the German political and business communities.<sup>55</sup> “We were very aware of how this instrument could work even though that didn’t hold him [Putin] back,” the official explained, even if the Scholz government was more critical and willing than its predecessor to play the Nord Stream card to pressure Putin.<sup>56</sup> Despite these last-minute German efforts, Putin invaded Ukraine. A few days later, Chancellor Scholz would officially change Germany’s posture *vis-à-vis* Russia and frame its support to Ukraine in his famous *Zeitenwende* (watershed) speech.<sup>57</sup>

German Chief of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) Bruno Kahl, as well as many other senior German policymakers, did not see the Russian invasion coming. Bruno Kahl, for example, was caught in Kiev when the war broke out and had to be evacuated by Special Forces.<sup>58</sup> Despite this, he would go on to tell parliament eight months later that the BND had been warning Putin would “achieve his political goals” using force if necessary.<sup>59</sup> Despite his claims to parliament, he was reported to have told CIA director William Burns that an invasion was “not going to happen”.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

The German government’s response in the lead-up to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was characterised by disbelief in the likelihood of full-scale war. German policymakers remained convinced that dependency and dialogue would suffice to rein in Russian aggression. This *Weltanschauung* blinded them to the mounting signs of an impending invasion. The core assumption that Putin’s actions were limited to coercive diplomacy rather than large-scale war led to a reactive and cautious stance. Intelligence warnings from the US and the UK were initially met with scepticism. Instead, the German government put more trust in its own assessments and mediation role, further reinforcing its reluctance to take preventative military or economic measures, out of fear of further aggravating the situation. While Germany eventually aligned itself with NATO and EU allies in supporting Ukraine after the invasion, its

<sup>53</sup> Fed. Chancell. Fed. Repub. Ger., ‘Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow’.

<sup>54</sup> Interview 43

<sup>55</sup> Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> Interview 43

<sup>57</sup> ‘Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin’, Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Special Forces Evacuated German Spy Chief from Ukraine -Focus Magazine’, Europe, *Reuters*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/special-forces-evacuated-german-spy-chief-ukraine-focus-magazine-2022-02-25/>.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Ukraine-Krieg: Zäsur für Geheimdienste’, Deutsche Welle (DW), 17 October 2022, <https://www.dw.com/de/ukraine-krieg-z%C3%A4sur-f%C3%BCr-geheimdienste/a-63464194>.

<sup>60</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden’s White House and the Struggle for America’s Future*, Erste editie (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 553.

“It is clear that sustainable security cannot be achieved against Russia, only with Russia.”

pre-war miscalculations exemplify how officials deeply believed Putin would act according to their own notion of rationality: large-scale war on the European continent was therefore simply seen as an irrational prospect. These misjudgements resulted in Germany being caught off guard when diplomacy failed. The invasion of Ukraine forced a dramatic shift in German policy, culminating in Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, which signalled a fundamental re-evaluation of Germany's defence posture and its role in European security. This turning point highlights how the crisis ultimately shattered long-held assumptions about Russia, resulting in a more assertive and security-oriented German foreign policy moving forward.

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