

**“Michel und Mauer”:
Post-Unification Germany
as seen through Editorial Cartoons**

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The rise of nation-states in the previous century was frequently accompanied by efforts to personify national characteristics. Uncle Sam became the preeminent representative of the ethos of the United States; the character of England was typecast in the figure of John Bull; and, in the wake of the French Revolution, Marianne emerged as the personification of French values. While most Western nations invented figures which tend to command a certain degree of pride and respect of their citizens, Germany alone “adopted a national stereotype which did not embody the collective aspirations of her people, but rather a sense of inadequacy, disappointment or failure.”⁰ This figure, which surfaces over and over again in editorial cartoons to portray the predicaments of the Germans, is

"der deutsche Michel". As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Federal Republic and the tenth anniversary of the unification of Germany, there is good reason to reflect on the recent evolution of the Michel and to use the insights gained to illuminate discussions about contemporary German affairs in our own courses.⁰ In this discussion I will first comment on a particular depiction of Michel in ten editorial cartoons without aspiring to author a comprehensive account of the subject, and then suggest a few strategies for working with these cartoons in the German classroom.

Unlike his European counterparts, Michel's existence antedates the emergence of the nation-states. Textual evidence of the term "deutscher Michel" can be traced back to the Reformation, although the references to boorishness and simplemindedness are anything but flattering.⁰ The first illustrations of the figure appeared only with the rise of nationalistic aspirations in the nineteenth century. Michel is usually presented as a perplexed and gullible figure

whose requisite pointed nightcap ("Zipfelmütze") underscores his lethargy or indolence. He is most frequently the unwitting prey of external forces and is depicted only rarely as taking initiative.⁰ It is thus no surprise that during the Third Reich Michel was discredited as a personification of the German character, utterly lacking in the qualities championed by National Socialist ideology.

Shortly after the end of the Second World War Michel was revived, once again as the unassuming figure who simply wants to get on with his life. However, the bifurcation of the world political arena into Western and Eastern camps radically affected his appearance. Since 1949 Michel has been portrayed on occasion not as one, but as two figures. German editorial cartoonists have employed this "twin Michel" to comment on the division of Germany into two separate states as well as the attendant straining of relations between East and West Germans. During times at which the question of national identity was especially importunate, such as the late 1940s and early 1990s, pictures of the twin

Michel near a wall were not uncommon, and for this reason I think that it makes sense to speak of a graphic topos: "Michel und Mauer."

The earliest and most provocative illustrations of this topos stem from Hans Koehler. The following cartoon,⁰ entitled "Lied bei der Arbeit," was drawn shortly after the creation of two German states in 1949. It merits attention because it shows the Michel acting, rather than reacting:

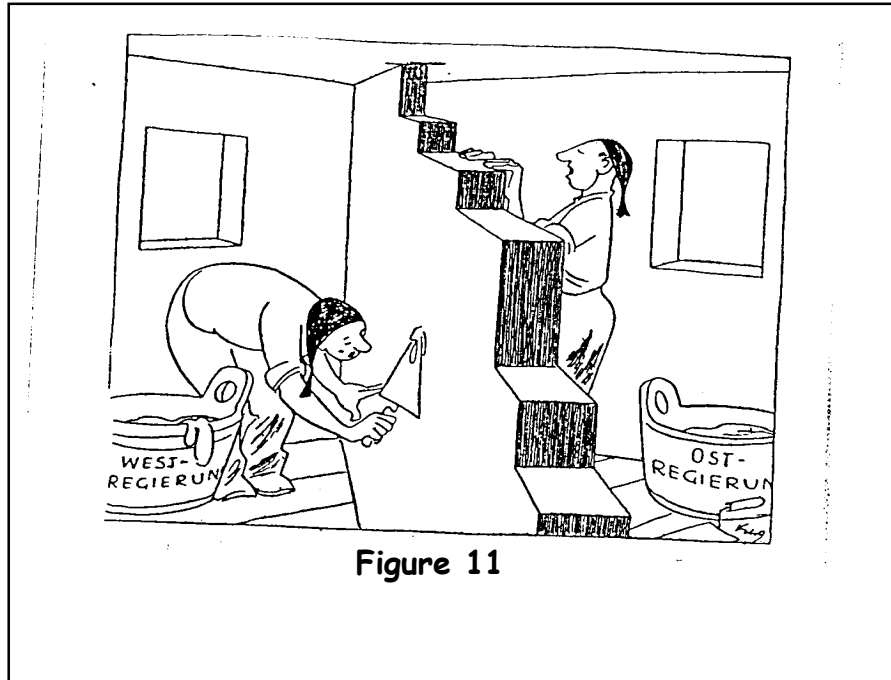
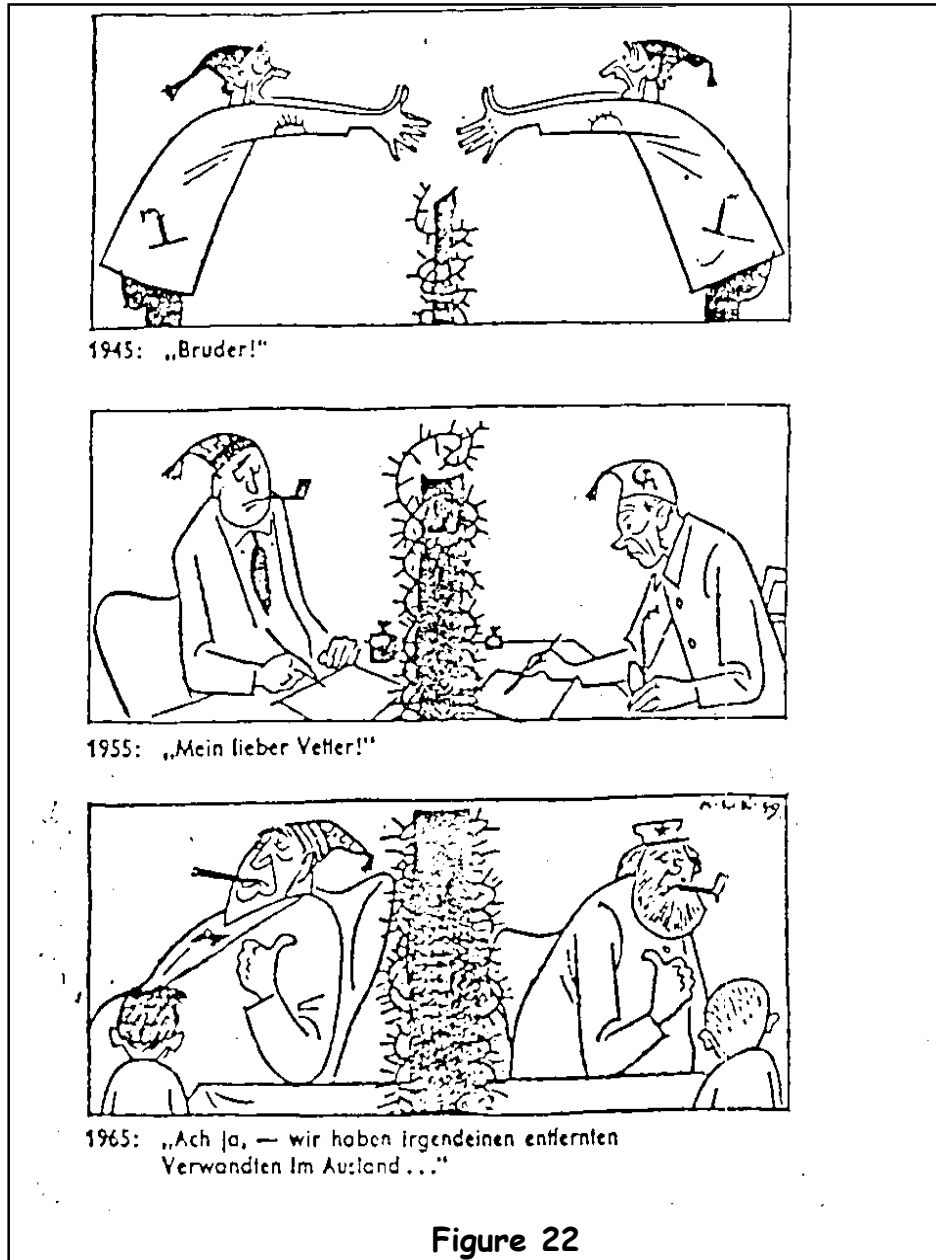


Figure 11

Here the twin Michel are building a wall through an enclosed space, allegorically representing Germany. They work diligently together while blithely singing a nationalistic hymn from the early nineteenth century, Arndt's "Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?"⁰ The caption to this cartoon submits the answer endorsed by Arndt and Koehler, but which evidently escapes the twin Michel, who unwittingly seal the division of Germany through their initiative. Significantly, the wall is built in such a way that each Michel can look out of only one window, thereby creating an environment in which his field of vision is narrowed by geopolitical and ideological constraints.

In the very same year Koehler drew the most famous and poignant illustration of the topos⁰:

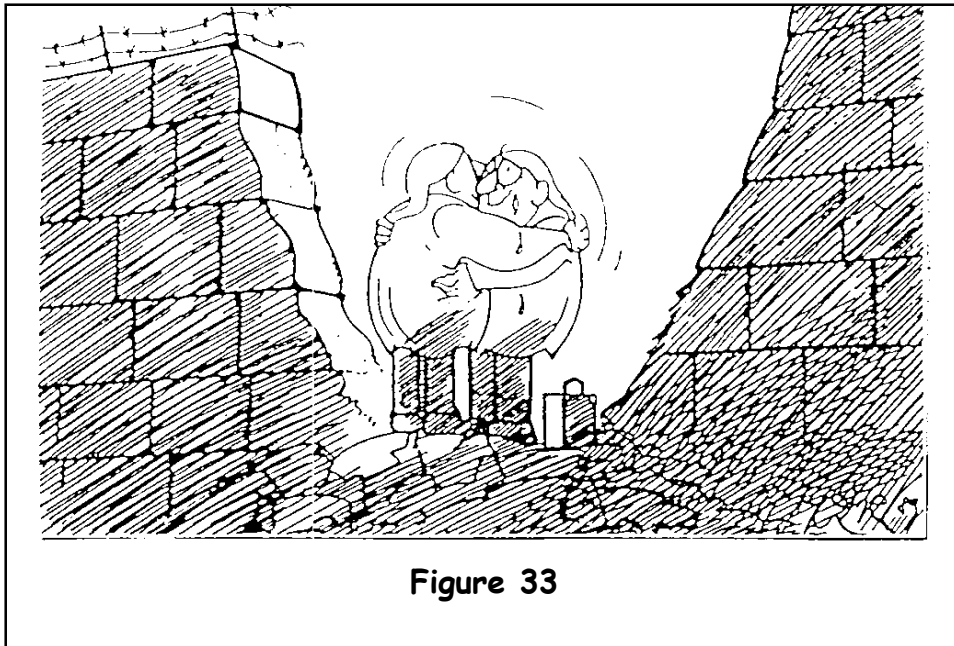


Koehler not only foretells the geopolitical fission of Germany, but also the ensuing psychological alienation. Contrary to the former cartoon, the twin Michel are not complicit in the efforts to formalize their separation, but are now portrayed as victims of forces over which

they have no control. By viewing each frame in sequence, ideally without captions, one will quickly recognize the actual fateful developments which Koehler in 1949 merely envisioned: whereas in the first frame the Michel are perfect mirror-images of each other, in each subsequent frame their gradual alienation is portrayed: different facial features, different kinds of clothing, different ideological affiliations, and several subtle indicators of economic disparity. In each frame the wall grows higher and thicker as the Michel grow older and heavier. The last frame introduces a post-war generation which learns of the existence of "some distant relative in a foreign country" whom one cannot, and perhaps no longer wants to, see again. By facing away from the wall—and away from his "twin"—each Michel complies with geopolitical realities and seems to have forgotten, or repressed, the embrace to which he aspired in the first frame. The textual anchors of this cartoon series—"Bruder" (1945), "Vetter" (1955), "entfernter Verwandte" (1965)—reinforce the deplorable trajectory of German-German relations that Koehler anticipates.

This third frame depicts well the situation to which most Germans resigned themselves, despite several commendable initiatives to foster meaningful relations between East and West.⁰ The Ostpolitik of the 1970s and 1980s ushered in a new image of the twin Michel, who were no longer situated on either side of a wall, but occasionally sitting beside each other on the shipwrecked Boat of Unity (a post-war variation on the Horatian "ship of state"). During this period questions of national identity were less acute and the prospects of unification were more uncertain, if not considered to be more remote. Perhaps for these reasons the "Michel und Mauer" topos—to the best of my knowledge—does not recur until the Berlin Wall collapsed in November 1989, after which date it becomes a favorite setting for editorial commentary through 1994.

One of the first and most memorable examples of this trend was submitted by Walter Hanel⁰:



This cartoon captures the euphoria attending the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the irrevocable opening of the German-German border. The obstacles preventing any meaningful interaction between the twin Michel in Koehler's cartoons have now been broken down. Neither Michel bears any label affiliating him with either the West or East German state; they even seem to have attained the mirror-image quality portrayed in Figure 1 and the first frame of Figure 2. The warm, tearful embrace suggests that all forces of discrimination and separation have been surmounted. Just as marchers in the Gentle Revolution altered their rallying cry from "Wir sind das Volk" to "Wir sind ein Volk," this

embrace holds out the promise that the twin Michel might evolve into a single figure again. The emotional momentum towards unity was even strong enough to override the unshaken logic of arithmetical principle⁰:

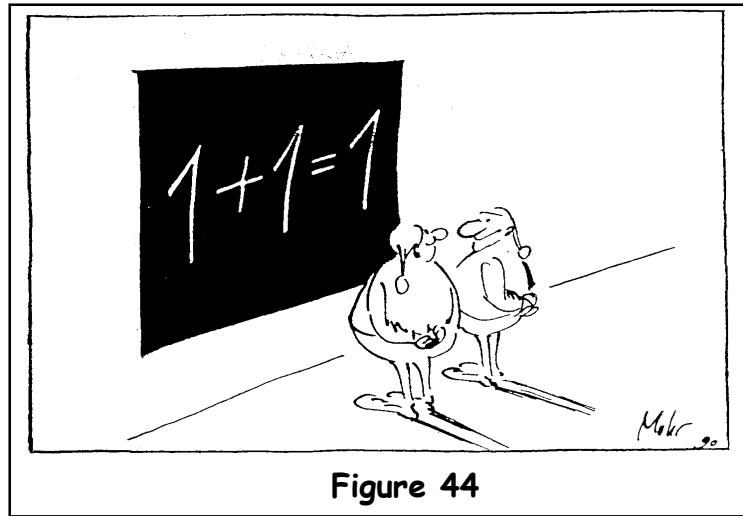


Figure 44

For numerous reasons that cannot be explored here, this euphoria began to subside once the true short- and long-term ramifications of unification became apparent.⁰ The pace at which political unification took place outraced that required for social, cultural, and psychological adjustments. Public opinion polls and numerous sociological and psychological studies registered the incommensurability between behaviors and expectations among inhabitants of the new and the

old Bundesländer. The precipitous unification after forty years of separation was a fertile spawning ground for a range of anxious and bitter emotions. A commentary by the East German cabarettist Peter Ensikat explains this condition and complements the editorial cartoons well:

Die sich im November 89 besoffen in den Armen lagen, liegen sich jetzt ganz nüchtern in den Haaren. Endlich trennen uns keine Mauern mehr. Das einzige, was jetzt noch zwischen uns liegt, sind vierzig Jahre unterschiedlicher Erfahrungen. Um uns näherzukommen, müßten wir uns erstmal kennenlernen. Gerade das aber hat der deutsche Einigungsvertrag irgendwie nicht vorgesehen. Ost- und westdeutsche Vereinigungsfachleute gingen einfach mal davon aus, daß wir zusammengehörten, so sehr zusammengehörten, daß der eine in sich getrost auflösen könnte, um im anderen aufzugehen. Die Hingabe des einen an den anderen wurde in Paragraphen gegossen, und so entstand eine

deutsche Liebesgeschichte mit rein
rechtstaatlichen Gefühlen, die zwar keiner
empfindet, aber jeder beim anderen einklagen
kann.⁰

Elsewhere Ensikat elaborated on the tragic outcome of
this 'Liebesgeschichte':

Wir meinen eine gemeinsame Sprache zu
sprechen, nur weil wir alle deutsch reden. So
wie Liebende sich aufs unausgesprochene Wort
verstehen, mißverstehen wir uns aufs
ausgesprochene. Die heimliche Liebe, die uns
verband, so lange die Mauer uns trennte, ist
zu einer unheimlich offenen Feindschaft
geworden, seit uns nichts mehr trennt als
unsere Eigenart."¹³

The rapid transformation of affection into rancor is
illustrated well in the following two cartoons by Hans-
Jürgen Starke¹⁴:

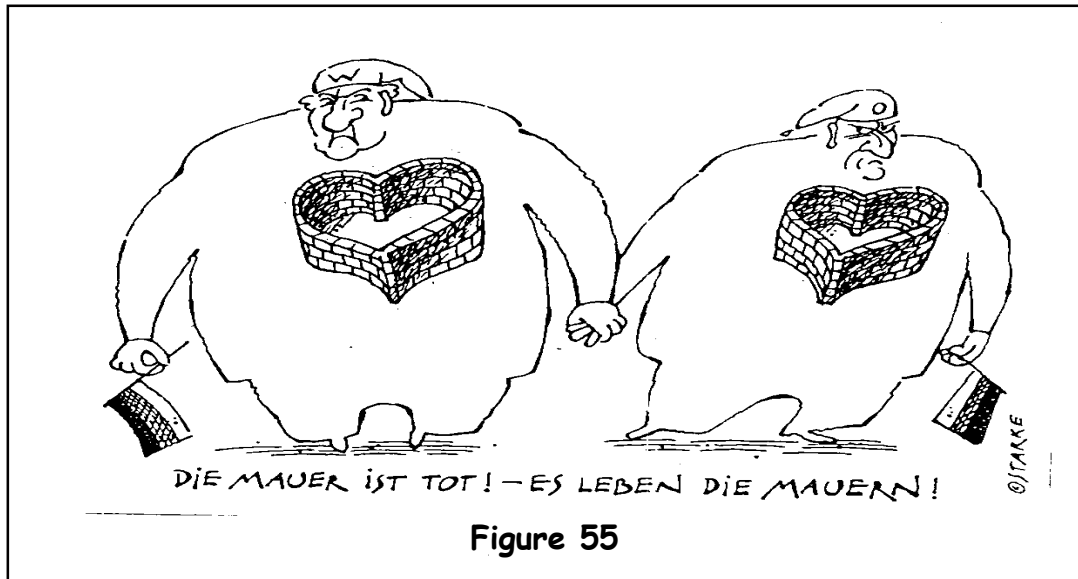


Figure 55

Here the twin Michel have broken the embrace depicted in Figure 3. Hand-holding is the last vestige of their "heimliche Liebe." The facial expressions clearly show signs of disaffection, as does the urge to move off in different directions. Although each Michel still has a tenuous hold on a German flag, their caps clearly indicate differing allegiances or, to use Ensikat's words, "peculiarities"—a development that recalls the second frame in Figure 2. Finally, the interiorization of the wall in the shape of a heart signifies deep-seated feelings whose existence may well be more sinister than that of any physical wall.

What is tacit in this cartoon finds its "unheimlich offen" verbal expression in the following work.¹⁵ Here the emergent signs of division ("W" and "O") have been reified as the frequently pejorative neologisms "Wessi" and "Ossi"¹⁶:

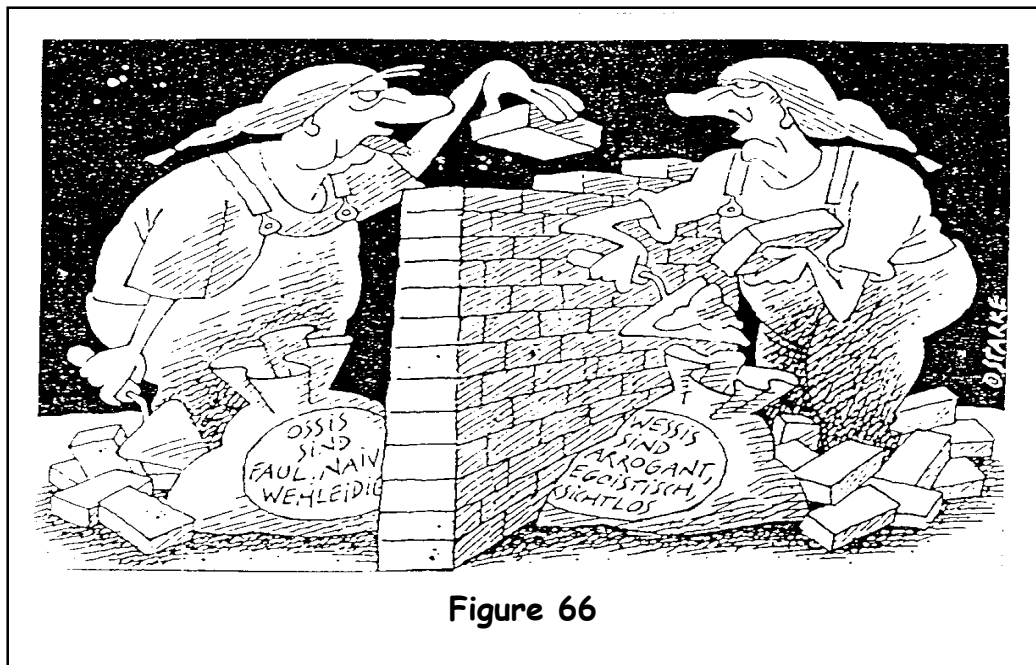


Figure 66

It is instructive to contrast this cartoon with Figure 1. Here the two Michel are not whistling while they work; they intentionally and maliciously build a wall with the bricks of prejudice and resentment. The materials for the wall are not furnished respectively

by an "West-Regierung" and "Ost-Regierung," but are rather taken from bags which the Michel themselves ostensibly have filled. Significantly, the bags and bricks are labeled respectively "Wessi" and "Ossi," thus drawing attention away from the the political arena (where the Michel have little influence) and towards the everyday realities of personal relations. Each Michel has resolved to reconstruct the wall; their collaboration clearly shows that separation is mutually desired. In the meantime, the mistrust is so pronounced that each Michel keeps his eyes fixed on his twin, not wishing to give his counterpart the upper hand for a moment.

Significantly, the Michel take no comfort in having erected the wall and quickly find themselves in an unsettling situation¹⁷:

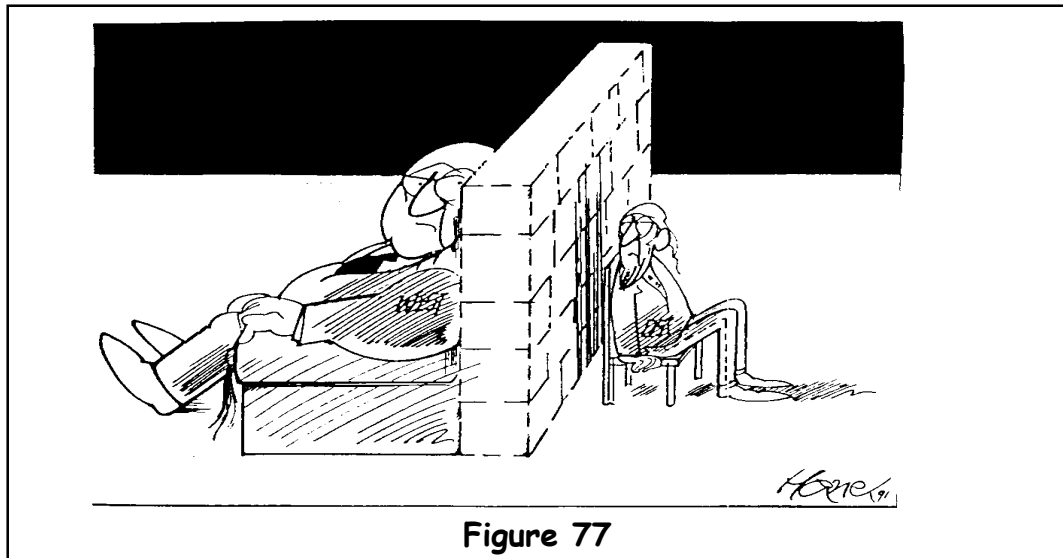
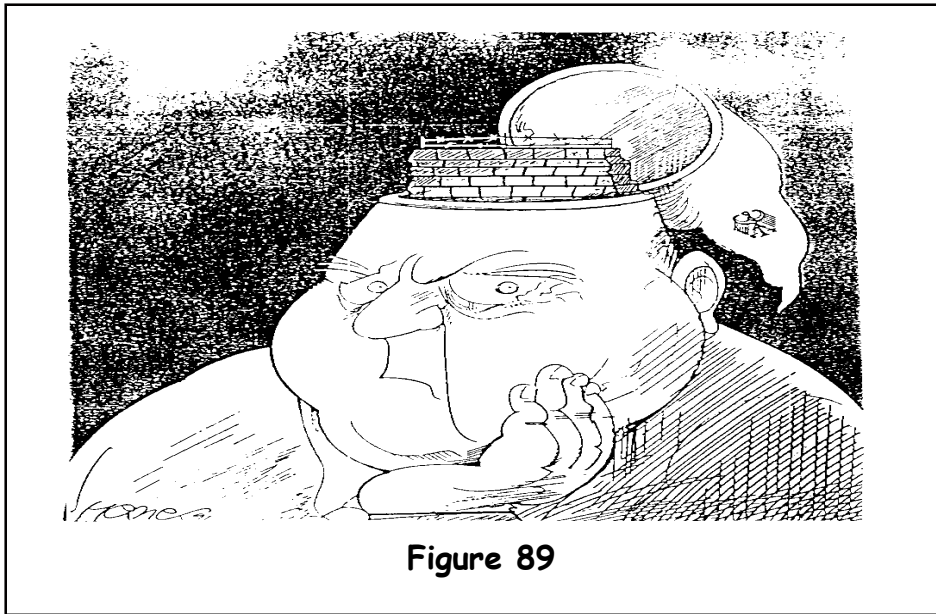


Figure 77

This cartoon is strongly reminiscent of the third frame of Figure 2: the two Michel sit back to back, separated by a thick wall; both wear labels identifying their affiliation or identity; both sit on chairs ostensibly commensurate with their position in united Germany, the East German visually relegated to the status of a "Bürger zweiter Klasse.". However, the situation portrayed in Figure 2 has exacerbated. Instead of resignation or indifference, here resentment and distrust are palpable: each Michel casts a watchful eye toward the edge of the wall to ensure that his twin does not attempt to violate the border. In essence, the Michel have enacted in the private sphere a variant of

the "Abgrenzung" policy that the German states—BRD and DDR—had dismantled by the end of 1989.

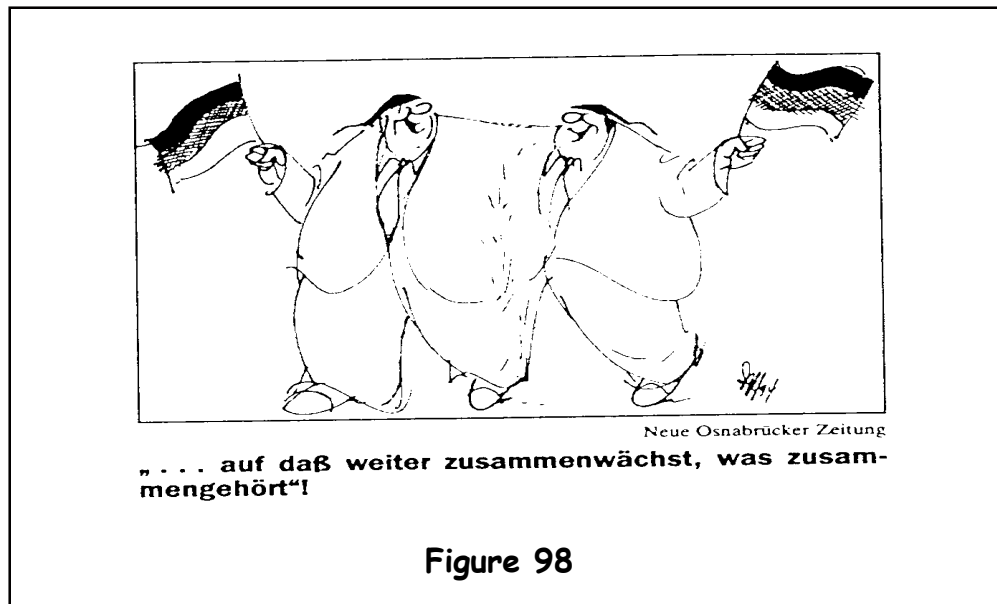
The wall depicted in the previous two cartoons has no tangible equivalent in contemporary Germany, but is rather an allegorical representation of the psychological estrangement which set in after the terms of unification had been finalized.¹⁸ Nearly a decade prior to publication of these cartoons Peter Schneider pondered the longevity of the Berlin Wall and concluded: "die Mauer im Kopf einzureißen wird länger dauern, als irgendein Abrißunternehmen für die sichtbare Mauer braucht."¹⁹ With this assertion Schneider had coined a phrase ("Mauer im Kopf") which began to gain currency by the end of 1990. Arguably the best illustration of this syndrome was submitted by Walter Hanel²⁰:



Here the wall that the twin Michel were erecting in the previous cartoons has been internalized. Although Michel seems to have overcome his dual existence, the wall continues a more insidious existence in the head of the single figure. It has become a psychological stigma that seems to precludes any pleasure or satisfaction with the post-unification state of affairs. Michel himself has become a disquieted figure whose brooding leads to profound inertia.

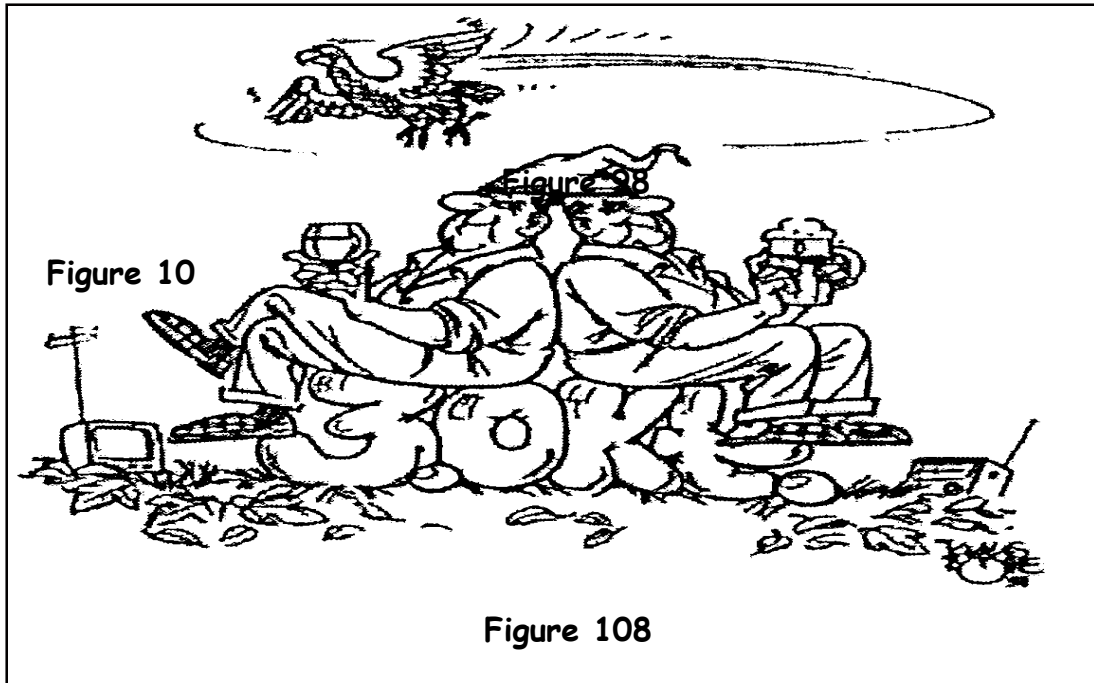
The recriminations seem to have reached their fevered pitch by the end of 1994. As questions of national identity or national characteristics receded from

headlines, the relevance of drawing the twin Michel seems to have diminished considerably. Since 1994 editorial cartoonists have focused attention more on a host of domestic and international issues that affect a single perplexed Michel, such as taxation , health insurance, gender inequality, political extremism, Bosnia, Somalia, and the European Union. Nonetheless, public opinion polls conducted by the Emnid Institute continue to show that the "Mauer im Kopf" syndrome has not lessened in severity in recent years. Despite such troubling reports, the few representations of the twin Michel since 1994 intimate a reconciliation of differences²¹:



This upbeat cartoon revives the hope realized provisionally in Figure 4 and suggests that the debilitating “Mauer im Kopf” syndrome can be overcome. The Michel are not only identical in stature and affiliation, but they have begun to assimilate physically, and evidently psychologically. The caption alludes to Willy Brandt’s famous words spoken upon the collapse of the Berlin Wall²² and clearly show that the Michel have already initiated a process of reconciliation (“weiter”). Walking on three legs is certainly cumbersome, but forward progress can be made if each Michel supports and trusts his twin.

For the seventh anniversary of German unification Klaus Böhle presented a new image of the twin Michel which suggests that the "Mauer im Kopf" is no longer as pressing a concern as it had been²³:



Three elements attract the immediate attention of the viewer: the huge "3. Oktober" that signifies the holiday of National Unity; the twin Michel; and the eagle swirling intently overhead. Replacing the dividing wall of earlier cartoons is an edifice that that invites the Michel to relax together. Although their faces are turned away from each other, their body

language conveys none of the tension evident in earlier cartoons. Here each Michel finds repose on the Bench of National Unity (literally!), on the ends of which they prop up their feet. Each Michel is relaxed: his smile and closed eyes suggest a pleasant, restful state, somewhat reminiscent of the complacency and lethargy for which the Michel has been known conventionally. On the Bench of National Unity the twin Michel lean back-to-back—a gesture connoting mutual trust and support. To be sure, there are conspicuous differences between the two Michel represented here: the West German is drinking wine in front of a tv set; the East German is drinking beer in front of a radio. Yet the Michel seem to ascribe no importance to these differences. They wear the same clothing, have the same physique, are of the same generation, and exhibit no cares or worries. The most significant feature of this cartoon, however, is the fact that the twin Michel are under one cap—a clear sign of reconciliation. Circling above the two Michel is an eagle which, as the age-old emblem of the German state, has a vested interest in dispelling

whatever grounds for enmity the Michel might still harbor towards one another.

For all the optimism connoted in these last two cartoons, conclusions drawn from a sociological study published in 1995 seem to remain valid today:

"Die Deutschen ... stehen vor der Aufgabe, beim Abbau der Ost-West-Kluft ein mittleres 'goldenes Tempo' zu finden, das weder die Geduld der Ostdeutschen noch die Solidaritätsbereitschaft der Westdeutschen überfordert. Noch länger und schwieriger dürfte der Weg zur inneren Einheit sein, zur Aufhebung der Dialektik von westdeutscher Dominanz und ostdeutscher Deklassierung und zum Abbau der inneren Entfremdung."²⁴

These ten editorial cartoons, or an appropriate subset, can be used to sensitize students to a variety of issues that have emerged since German unification in 1990. Interest in this topic can be best aroused by

allowing students to discuss each cartoon initially as an image, without any accompanying text. This activity grants them the freedom to catalog the visual detail and then to explore possible interpretations of the cartoon. In a multi-framed cartoon like Figure 2 it makes sense to have students discuss each frame individually, in sequence, and then to reappraise their opinions upon seeing the cartoon in its entirety. Invariably, two or three competing, if not conflicting, readings will emerge from the discussion; in small groups students can fairly quickly compose a title or caption for the cartoon as well as a synopsis of their preferred reading. After completing this four-skill brainstorming activity students can be presented with the original texts (to Figures 1, 2, 5 and 6) and discuss to what extent it refines or refutes their own interpretation. Once again, with multi-framed cartoons a suitable reading comprehension exercise might have students matching up a particular caption with its visual counterpart.

Upon having explored the dynamic of the twin Michel since 1945, students can be asked to reflect once more on the entire thematic complex with greater linguistic sophistication. One way of achieving this goal would be to familiarize students with idiomatic phrases that pertain to the cartoons. The following list presents a few of the idioms that lend themselves well to each figure:

- Figure 1 mauern; auf etwas pfeifen; zur
 Kenntnis nehmen; ohne Rücksicht auf
 Verluste
- Figure 2 jemandem aufs Haar gleichenl mit dem
 Rücken an der Wand; jemandem den
 Rücken kehren; darüber ist längst
 Gras gewachsen
- Figure 3 wie im siebten Himmel sein; ein Herz
 und eine Seele sein; jemanden um den
 Hals fallen; jemandem in die Arme
- Figure 4 fünf gerade sein lassen; mit etwas
 rechnen

fa

- Figure 5 jemandem in dem Haar liegen; in den sauren Apfel beißen; einem auf die Nerven gehen; jemandem ein Dorn im Auge sein; jemandem die kalte Schulter zeigen
- Figure 6 jemanden den Kopf waschen; jemandem die Leviten lesen; jemanden zur Rede stellen; seinem Herz Luft machen; jemandem Vorwürfe machen
- Figure 7 auf den toten Punkt kommen; den kürzeren ziehen
- Figure 8 den Kopf zerbrechen; etwas auf dem Herzen haben
- Figure 9 gleich und gleich gesellt sich gern; über die Runden kommen
- Figure 10 unter einen Hut bringen; auf jemanden Verlaß haben

Pre-writing exercises would have students matching up German idioms with their English equivalents, and then ascertaining the illustrations to which each idiom could be best applied. After completing these

activities students could then write a composition (report, letter, diary entry, etc.) in which they summarize the situations and developments portrayed in the cartoons.

Notes

¹ Eda Sagarra, "The Longevity of National Stereotypes: The German 'National Character' from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day" Yearbook of European Studies 7 (1994): 1-28, here 23. A word of caution is advised before the discussion continues. Unlike national symbols such as flags and national anthems, personifications are not products of political deliberation or national referendum. Such figures often emerge from popular culture and are fleshed out in the verbal or visual arts. For this reason portrayals of the Michel are never to be regarded as official or authoritative representations of Germany or Germanity, but rather as interpretations and evaluations—often oversimplified for ironic or satiric effect on immediate topical issues—submitted by individual artists and commentators. Despite this limitation, the Michel serves as a barometer of German self-image or a litmus test for gauging the acerbity of self-reflection.

² This paper is based on research begun at the Wiesneck Seminar in 1992. A teaching unit relevant to this theme is presented by Barbara Carvill and Edward Weintraut, "Schwierigkeiten beim Prozeß der deutschen Vereinigung," in Die Veränderungen in Deutschland. Aspekte der Vereinigung (Goethe Institut Atlanta, 1993)48-80.

³ Sagarra, 7-8; and Bernd Grote, Der Deutsche Michel. Ein Beitrag zur publizistischen Bedeutung der Nationalfiguren, in Dortmunder Beiträge zur Zeitungsforschung Volume 11 (Ruhfus: Dortmund, 1967) 38-40. See also Adolf Hauffen, Geschichte des deutschen Michels (Prague, 1918)41-44.

⁴ Sagarra, 24.

⁵ Hans Erich Köhler und Wilhelm Emmanuel Süskind, Wer hätte das von uns gedacht? Zehn Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Boppard: Boldt, 1960) 13. The following discussion derives in part from Süskind's commentary, Köhler and Süskind, 12.

⁶ The subcaption brings the culmination Arndt's enthusiastic answer to a long series of questions about the location of the German fatherland: "So weit die

deutsche Zunge klingt / Und Gott im Himmel Lieder singt
/ Das soll es sein! / Das, wackrer Deutscher, nenne
dein: / Das ganze Deutschland soll es sein! ..." Ludwig
Reiners, ed., Der ewige Brunnen (München: Beck, 1955)
451.

⁷ Koehler and Süskind, 9.

⁸ For a meticulous and balanced account of such
initiatives see Timothy Garton Ash, In Europe's Name.
Germany and the Divided Continent (New York: Random
House, 1993), especially 126-215. A more concise
account of these events is offered by Mary Fulbrook,
The Divided Nation. A History of Germany 1900-1990 (New
York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 207-220.

Summarizing his discussion of the growing alienation
between East and West Germans, the ethnologist John
Borneman notes: "the irony before the opening of the
Wall was that while contact between the two states
increased over time, contact between the citizens
decreased with age." Borneman, Belonging in the Two
Berlins. Kin, State, Nation (Cambridge: Cambridge
University, Press, 1992) 24-25. Noteworthy is a study
completed one year before "die Wende," according to

which West German youths considered East Germany a foreign country and an uninteresting place to visit—findings which corroborate the fears conveyed in Koehler's "Figure 2" above. See Richard Hilmar, "DDR und die Deutsche Frage: Antworten junger Generation," Deutschland Archiv 10 (1988) 1091-1100.

⁹ Walter Hanel, cartoon, in Walter Hanel, Susan Stern and James G Neuger, Off the Wall. A Wacky History of German Since 1989 (Frankfurt: Atlantik Brücke, 1993)

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¹⁰ Burghard Mohr, cartoon in Der Weg zur Einheit. Deutschland seit Mitte der achtziger Jahre, Informationen zur politischen Bildung 250 (München: Bruckmann, 1966) 3

¹¹ John Borneman, particularly 313-334; Fulbrook, 291-317; Immanuel Geiss, Die deutsche Frage. 1806-1990 (Mannheim: BI Taschenbuchverlag, 1992) 102-115; Rainer Geißler, "Neue Strukturen der sozialen Ungleichheit im vereinten Deutschland," in Robert Hettlage and Karl Lenz, ed., Deutschland nach der Wende / Eine Zwischenbilanz (München: Beck, 1995) 119-141, especially 132-134; Elisabeth Pond, Beyond the Wall.

Germany's Road to Unification (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1993) 225-230 and 242-248.

¹² Peter Ensikat, "Deutsche Liebe von oben," Wenn wir den Krieg verloren hätten (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1993) 35.

¹³ Ensikat, "Der neue deutsche Schüttelreim," Wenn wir den Krieg verloren hätten, 35

¹⁴ Hans-Jurgen Starke, cartoon, in Hans Dollinger, ed. Flitterwochen (München: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1991) 85.

¹⁵ Hans-Jürgen Starke, cartoon, Spiegel 2 November 1992: 169.

¹⁶ The sociologist Rainer Geißler notes: "40 Jahre deutsche Teilung haben in den Köpfen und Seelen der Menschen die Kategorien Westdeutsch-Ostdeutsch entstehen lassen, die nach der Wende umgangssprachlich als 'Wessi' und 'Ossi' manifest wurden. Das Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit zur einen oder andern Gruppierung der Deutschen verband sich bei vielen sehr schnell mit Vorstellungen des Oben bzw. Unten: Mit Westdeutsch und Ostdeutsch wurde nicht nur *Ungleichartigkeit*, sondern auch *Ungleichwertigkeit* assoziiert." Hettlage and Lenz,

133. For an astonishingly prescient account of this resentment see Peter Schneider, "Geschichte einer Trennung," Deutsche Ängste. Sieben Essays (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1988) 28.

¹⁷ Walter Hanel, cartoon, Spiegel 31 August 1992: 7

¹⁸ Borneman, 334

¹⁹ Peter Schneider, Der Mauerspringer (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1985) 102.

²⁰ Walter Hanel, cartoon, in Flitterwochen, 39.

²¹ Cartoon, Spiegel 28 March 1995: 7

²² "Aus dem Krieg und auch aus der Veruneinigung der Siegermächte erwuchs die Spaltung Europas, Deutschlands und Berlins. Jetzt wächst zusammen, was zusammengehört ... Die Teile Europas wachsen zusammen." Der Weg zur Einheit. Deutschland seit Mitte der achtziger Jahre, Informationen zur politischen Bildung 250 (München: Bruckmann, 1996) 24

²³ Klaus Böhle, cartoon, Die Welt 3 October 1997 (obtained from Welt-Online archive: "www.welt.de")

²⁴ Geißler, in Hettlage und Lenz, 140f.

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