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# Two countries in search of their role: a history of the Anglo-German Königswinter Conferences

Helene von Bismarck

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Adapted from a painting of the Drachenfels
in Königswinter, which appeared on the cover
of the first Königswinter Conference Report
and on many subsequent ones.

*Dedicated to the memory of Dame Lilo Milchsack, Sir Robert Birley and Sir Frank Roberts*

## Contents

## Editor's Preface

We, the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, are prepared for the changing relations between the UK and Europe. In these times of change, we will work to keep and further develop the mutual trust and understanding between Germany and the United Kingdom. The historic bonds, the successful reconciliation of the two countries and their citizens after both World Wars, and the cooperation in Europe, in the Atlantic Alliance and world wide are an encouragement, impetus and commitment for us.

We will continue to strengthen the relationship between Germany and the United Kingdom through the successful Königswinter dialogue, which has been going on for 70 years. The Königswinter Conferences, attended by leaders from politics, business, finance, science and culture, will remain the annual German-British forum for a free, open, personal and confidential exchange of thoughts. They will continue to serve as early indicators of changes in UK-German relations, allowing for timely bilateral state and societal interventions.

The same is true for the Economic Königswinter Conferences, the Defence and Security Königswinter Conferences, and the Young Königswinter Conferences, the latter having received exceptionally positive feedback in both countries over the last few years.

Our network of like-minded organisations in Germany and our strong relationship with partners in the UK will continue to assemble and unite those particularly interested in reinforcing personal and institutional ties between civic organisations and their members in both countries. Our lecture events, meetings with political leaders and other initiatives will continue to involve larger audiences in political and cultural debates.

As a non-governmental organisation, the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft will increase its efforts to include the Young Leaders in the conferences and the lecture programme in order to advance and shape ongoing successful collaboration between our countries on the international and global stage into the future.

Chairman of the
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Finally, I need to thank four women who kept Königswinter going behind the scenes for decades, and who all have been invaluable sources of information to me: Elke Berger, Maxine Vlieland, Joan Saliba and Jackie Newbury. Their significant contribution to Königswinter should never be overlooked.

# Two countries in search of their role: a history of the Anglo-German Königswinter Conferences

Helene von Bismarck

## 1 Origins

After attending the 2001 Königswinter Conference as an observer, the French author Dominique Moisi described it as 'a sobering experience for any Frenchman', because he felt that 'London and Berlin have succeeded in creating a network of contacts that has no equivalent in either Franco-British or Franco-German relations'.[1] What had started as an experiment at the initiative of a handful of private citizens in post-war Germany, quickly turned into a permanent fixture of Anglo-German reconciliation and dialogue that has gone on to the present day. As such, 'Königswinter' is not only the name of a small town on the Rhine, but also of an institution that has both influenced and mirrored the relationship between Germany and Britain for almost seventy years.

The Königswinter Conferences were originally conceived by Lilo Milchsack, the wife of a wealthy industrialist from the Ruhrgebiet. She was a highly educated woman with a surprisingly internationalist outlook, not just by the standards of her own generation. Born in 1905, she had studied at the universities of Geneva and Amsterdam and travelled to Britain before the Second World War. Like her husband, Hans Milchsack, she had been opposed to the Nazi regime from the beginning. In 1933, Hans Milchsack attended an address Hitler gave to an assembly of industrialists. He was one of only two participants brave enough to refuse joining the NSDAP, let alone providing them with funds.[2] The Milchsacks considered emigrating once Hitler had gained power, but they decided against it because Lilo had just given birth to their first baby, and because Hans did not want to give up his company. During the following years, Hans Milchsack helped several Jews escape from Germany.[3]

*Walter Scheel and Lilo Milchsack*

Throughout her life, the experience of two world wars and Hitler's tyranny remained Mrs. Milchsack's personal motivation for her tireless work towards Anglo-German reconciliation. When she was in her late seventies, she stated that the years of Nazi rule were more alive in her memory than any other period of her long life.[4] She had criticized her parents for not taking a more active stand against Hitler. After the war, she did not want her own two children to ever blame her for having stood on the sidelines. Her journeys to Britain in the 1930s, when Hitler was already in power, had been a formative experience. Mrs. Milchsack had tried to convince her British friends that Hitler's rule would inevitably result in a war. Not only had these efforts been futile, some of her British acquaintances had even accused her of being a traitor to her own country. She was convinced that British appeasement to Hitler was based on profound ignorance about the realities in Germany. The Königswinter Conferences were ambitiously conceptualized as an instrument for the preservation of peace. Designed as a window through which British elites could perceive Germany's dark sides as well as its virtues, this forum of Anglo-German dialogue should help ensure that a catastrophic mistake like appeasement never happened again.

It was the anti-Nazi attitude of the Milchsacks that brought them to the attention of the British occupation forces in 1945, and which eventually led to Lilo Milchsack crossing paths with Sir Robert Birley, the educational advisor to the British Control Commission. Hans' and Lilo's names could be found on the so-called 'White Lists' of politically reliable Germans with no Nazi leanings, which the British secret service MI5 had put together during the war. The British Control Commission immediately appointed Hans Milchsack mayor of his small hometown Wittlaer, near Düsseldorf. Lilo Milchsack helped her husband in his duties and became an engaged social worker in her community.

*Roy Jenkins, Sir Robert Birley, Lilo Milchsack, Prof. Emil Lehnartz*

Sir Robert Birley had travelled across Germany after university during the 1920s, an experience which he had enjoyed immensely. Pro-German, but anti-Nazi from the beginning, he had been critical of appeasement to Hitler. Early on, his many Jewish friends had made him aware of the realities of the Holocaust.[5] When Birley arrived in Germany in May 1947, he made a point of cultivating Germans known for their opposition to Hitler and their potential to contribute actively to the democratization of their country. Birley's regular weekend parties at his house near Bielefeld helped foster relationships between Britons and Germans. They also provided an opportunity for meetings between German anti-Nazis with often very different political views, who had not known each other, let alone worked together, before.[6] In January 1948, Lilo Milchsack attended one of these house parties.[7] It was the beginning of a close and lifelong friendship.

Birley and Mrs. Milchsack had more in common than their fondness for each other's home country. They both supported the idea of a strong civil society as a precondition for democracy, they had a profound sense of civic duty and they wanted to encourage others to stand up for what they believed to be right. As an educator and a self-described 'Gladstonian liberal', Birley took the view that denazification was only the first step on the way towards democratization in Germany. What the Germans were really lacking, in his opinion, was a sense of personal responsibility for the affairs of the state.[8] This conception of democracy was later reflected in the way the Königswinter Conferences were organized as a forum for people representing all influential sectors of society, rather than just politicians. It was also the reason why Milchsack, as well as her German successors and her British counterparts, fiercely defended the independence of the Königswinter Conference against attempts from the Auswärtige Amt and the Foreign Office to take charge.[9]

Lilo Milchsack felt that post-war Germany had much to learn from the British model of democracy. She was delighted when Birley facilitated a journey to Britain for her in the summer of 1948. At a time when ordinary Germans were not yet allowed to travel abroad, when there was neither a German state, nor a German embassy in London, she and nine other German women spent three weeks in Norwich and Cambridge at the invitation of the Foreign Office and the National Council of Women. They stayed in private houses to have a real exchange with British people, and they attended lectures about local government and social work, all in order 'to learn how democracy works at the grassroots'.[10] Mrs. Milchsack was overwhelmed by the kindness and tact of her British hosts. Even though she had personally been opposed to the Nazis, she felt the shame attached to her nationality acutely. She was deeply grateful that the British people she met during her trip were able, so shortly after the war, to distinguish between Germans and Nazis.[11]

Her trip to England inspired Mrs. Milchsack to create a society for the promotion of Anglo-German understanding, the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft, in the spring of 1949. Discussing this with Birley, whom she later called the 'midwife and godfather' of her project, they both agreed that it was vital to make a clean break with the past.[12] It had to be clear that this new organization had absolutely nothing to do with the prominent Anglo-German Society that had been very influential in Britain before the war, when senior members promoted appeasement and attended Nuremberg rallies.[13] All ten founders of the new society were private German citizens who had been opposed to the Third Reich. There were no politicians among them.[14]

Lilo Milchsack used every private contact she had to promote her work. After Birley had left Germany in 1949 to become headmaster of Eton College, she stayed closely in touch with him, whilst continuing to cultivate her relationship with the Education Branch of the British High Commission. She travelled to Britain regularly. In May 1950, on the invitation of Heinz Koeppler, she participated at a conference in Wilton Park, the former re-education centre for German prisoners of war which continued to host lectures and debates about democratic processes. Koeppler helped her new society along by putting Mrs. Milchsack in touch with influential personalities and organizations in Britain.[15]

By all accounts, Mrs. Milchsack's considerable success in drumming up interest for her work was to no small degree due to her supreme social skills and her formidable personality which made it very hard to say no to her.[16] William F. Deedes, editor of the Daily Telegraph, claimed that he had never met a woman who 'could so readily persuade other people to do her bidding and leave them feeling they had been favoured.'[17] In 1972, Lilo Milchsack was made a Honorary Dame Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in recognition for her contribution to Anglo-German reconciliation. She was also decorated with the Great Cross of Merit with Star in 1985.

## II Organisation

*Sir Robert Birley and Marion Gräfin Dönhoff*

From its inception, the work of the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft, which was – rather belatedly – renamed Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft in 2001, has rested on two pillars: the organization of guest lectures by British experts in Germany, and an annual Anglo-German conference. The latter took its name from the place where it was first held in 1950, the Adam-Stegerwald-House in Königswinter near Bonn. At first, it remained limited in scope and focused on specialized themes. In 1950, German and British social workers discussed how the harrowing post-war living conditions of the working classes could be alleviated. Hans and Lilo Milchsack covered all the costs. The second conference in 1951, about the role and responsibilities of the press in a democracy, put the conference on the map in both countries, because it brought journalists from THE SPECTATOR, the NEW STATESMAN, THE OBSERVER, the DAILY TELEGRAPH, D.P.A., FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG and DIE ZEIT to Königswinter. It was at the suggestion of one of the British journalists in attendance, Kingsley Martin, editor of the NEW STATESMAN, that the concept behind the conference was subsequently broadened.[18] In 1952, Königswinter for the first time turned into a meeting place of political, economic, business and intellectual elites from Britain and Germany for a general debate about 'Great Britain and the Continent'.

The 1952 conference witnessed a series of innovations in its organization that have survived at Königswinter, with very few alterations, to the present day. The choice of a very general and rather bland topic became typical, as this allowed for as wide-ranging a debate as possible. It also enabled participants to react to unforeseeable political

and economic developments in the months and weeks before the conferences. The guestlist was produced in accordance with two main criteria: elitism and political neutrality. The idea was to invite people from positions of significant power and influence, who would be able to use whatever they had learned at the conference to effect real change. Personalizing a well-known German phrase, Lilo Milchsack proudly stated that she did not want 'the upper ten thousand' to attend, but 'only the upper thousand'.[19] At the same time, it was important to the organizers that Königswinter was not beholden to one political grouping, or party. The aim was to give participants a realistic insight into the situation in the other country, respectively, and for that purpose, a cross-party approach was vital, if not easy to maintain. However well thought-out and impartial the original guestlist, the hosts had obviously no way of forcing people to accept their invitation.[20] Lilo Milchsack had managed very early on to establish a close relationship with several prominent Labour politicians, such as Richard Crossman, Denis Healey, and Roy Jenkins, but she continuously and successfully pushed to get more Tory politicians involved in order to balance the numbers. In this, she was aided by the Foreign Office.[21] Within the German delegations, there was a slight tendency towards the SPD during the first three decades, although some influential CDU and FDP politicians, such as Richard von Weizsäcker or Ralf Dahrendorf, did play a regular and influential role at the conferences. After Mrs. Milchsack retired from the organizing team in 1982, the picture became more balanced on the German side, as far as party politics were concerned. Another problem regarding the guestlist has been harder to deal with: German Anglophiles and

*Lilo Milchsack and Richard Crossman*

*Lord Dahrendorf, Christopher Meyer and Klaus Kinkel*

British Germanophiles have naturally been more likely to accept an invitation to Königswinter than those disinterested or even critical of the other country. As a result, there has always been a slight danger that delegates would go home with too optimistic an assessment of the state of the Anglo-German relationship.

The 1952 conference was also innovative in its focus on conversation and debate rather than lengthy lectures. In view of the high calibre of all participants, Mrs. Milchsack and Birley, whom she consulted about this, found it unnecessary to embrace a traditional hierarchical approach with expert speakers instructing the audience. Instead, the conference was structured very similarly to the way it is organized today: opening remarks to the plenary were followed by intimate discussions about more specific topics in small working groups, who would then report their conclusions in a joint closing session attended by all delegates.[22] In the early 1950s, this was a progressive concept, even by British, let alone German, standards.[23] How the delegates debated at Königswinter, was at least as ground-breaking as what they debated. All discussions took place under the Chatham House rule. As there was no formal communiqué in the end, the participants could openly exchange ideas and did not have to shy away from controversy.[24]

Interest in the conference grew continuously in both countries. The discussions were accompanied by social events in the evenings hosted by the British Embassy in Bonn and a member of the German government, usually the Foreign Secretary. Königswinter has always been convened in the spring, and has been cancelled only once, in 1966, due to a snap election in Britain. A new tradition was introduced in 1957 and continued throughout the Cold War: following the conference, the British delegation travelled to Berlin for a few days at the invitation of the mayor to gain a first-hand impression of the divided city.[25] Another important innovation introduced at the 1979 meeting was a roundtable of parliamentarians representing every major party in the host country.[26] This gave the visiting delegation real insight into the domestic debates that form the backdrop to foreign policy.

*Sir Frank Roberts, Sir Nigel Broomfield, Dr. Elfriede Regelsberger, Sir Oliver Wright and Peter von der Heydt in 1993*

The success of Königswinter was such that it was decided as early as 1960 to adapt the concept of an informal annual Anglo-German dialogue to the Young Königswinter Conferences, bringing together young leaders from both countries. In 2001, Economic Königswinter was created as an additional, more specialized forum for business leaders. Since 2011, members of the British and German security community and the military have convened at the Defence and Security Königswinter Conference. These three programmes have complemented the main Königswinter Conferences and continue to be extremely popular.

In 1964, the conference convened in Oxford, rather than Königswinter, for the first time. What was originally conceived as a one-off gesture of thanks to Lilo Milchsack, strongly supported and financed in part by the Foreign Office, was repeated, albeit in Cambridge, in 1970 at the

initiative of Frank Roberts, who had two years earlier retired from his last posting as British Ambassador to Bonn. Roberts had known Mrs. Milchsack since 1951 and had promoted her work within the Foreign Office from the beginning.[27] He felt that Königswinter was a vital institution for the Anglo-German relationship, not because it automatically led to greater harmony, but because it made misunderstandings and mutual expectations more visible and created lasting personal relationships which he considered to be as important as written diplomatic exchanges.[28] Roberts argued that the Königswinter Conferences of the early years could be seen as a German version of Wilton Park. Now that the latter had stopped putting on Anglo-German events, there was every need to get Königswinter over to Britain on a regular basis.[29]

In 1968, Roberts became chairman of the newly founded British Königswinter Steering Committee, which has since then acted as a counterpart to the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft in the organization of the conference. Since 1974, the location of the conference has alternated every year between Britain and Germany. The hosts bear all the costs, whereas both sides draw up their guestlists individually. Every winter, the British Steering Committee and Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft send delegates to a preparatory meeting, which is, confusingly, also called the (joint) Königswinter Steering Committee. Participants have normally included one British and one German representative for every major political party as well as important societal sectors, such as business, media, academia, and, sometimes, the defence community.[30]

The Steering Committee and the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft have been structured very differently, and they have as a rule never interfered with one another's work, nor have they even been well informed about it.[31] Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft is a members-based society with activities spread across Germany. It has been financed with membership fees and project-specific sponsoring from the German state, as well as sporadic corporate

donations.[32] For decades, Hans Milchsack regularly covered any shortfall in the conference financing.[33] In 1996, the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft began to receive stable but limited financial support from the newly established Königswinter Foundation, with contributions from several major co-operations and banks.[34] The British Steering Committee, on the other hand, is best characterized as a loose network with largely self-appointed members, who meet a few times every year.[35] As the Foreign Office covers only one third of the costs, the British Steering Committee largely depends on sponsoring from companies, which makes the maintenance of contacts to the 'outer circle' of former Steering Committee members and Königswinter alumni crucially important.[36] The bulk of the work falls to the chairman, who is responsible for the fund-raising, and to one organizer in charge of the conference who answers directly to him.[37]

*Hans-Henning Horstmann and Sir Michael Arthur*

What Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft and the British Steering Committee have in common is the fact that the success of their work largely depends on the personal initiative of their leaders, who work on a voluntary basis. Given its informality and shoestring budget, it is remarkable how an event of this calibre has been kept going over seven decades.[38] When Milchsack stepped down in 1982, a succession of retired German diplomats, all of whom had been posted to Britain over the course of their careers, took over the presidency of Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft: Karl-Günther von Hase, Jürgen Ruhfus, Hermann Freiherr von Richthofen, Gebhardt von Moltke and Hans-Henning Horstmann. With the one exception of the liberal peer Lord Watson of Richmond, the Steering Committee has always been chaired by a former British Ambassador to Germany. After almost twenty years, Frank Roberts handed the reigns to Sir Oliver Wright, followed by Sir Nigel Broomfield, Lord Watson, and finally, Sir Michael Arthur.[39]

## III Political impact

*Richard von Weizsäcker, Christine Bergmann, Lord Dahrendorf and Jürgen Ruhfus*

Königswinter was never supposed to be a forum for official bilateral negotiations, nor an occasion for business people to pitch new deals.[40] Nevertheless, both governments took it very seriously. Apart from the opportunity for an open and informative exchange, officials regarded Königswinter as an important act of public diplomacy, highlighted by the presence of influential journalists.[41] Since 1965, government ministers have regularly attended the conferences, or at least parts of it, to deliver after-dinner speeches, most of them strictly off the record. These speeches could act as a counterweight to formal negotiations or domestic debates. In times of public disagreements between Britain and Germany, they could be used to smooth things over, but they could also contain warnings or present a method of venting frustration in a secure environment.[42] On several occasions, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister also turned up: Margaret Thatcher met Helmut Schmidt at the conference in 1980, and Helmut Kohl in 1990, and Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder both took part in 2000. Their attendance was paired with an Anglo-German summit in the days before or after the conference. In 1980, the Foreign Office and the Auswärtige Amt collaborated successfully in pushing the scheduled date of a European Council meeting, so Thatcher and Schmidt could be present at Königswinter.[43] One year later, Schmidt flew home early from his father's funeral to speak at the conference.[44] In 1982, the outbreak of the Falkland War interrupted the gathering at Cambridge, prompting every British MP and senior official present to leave for London. Following a debate about the war in the House of Commons, almost all of them returned to the Königswinter Conference, updating their German counterparts on the situation in the Falklands.[45]

*Lord Carrington and Helmut Schmidt*

Königswinter was an instrument of Anglo-German reconciliation and dialogue, but the debates at the conferences did not focus on a theoretical exploration of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The idea was to take a wider view and to live the Anglo-German partnership, rather than talk about it. Instead, geopolitical developments, questions of global security, as well as economic shifts and societal trends figured highly on the agenda. The debates at Königswinter represent an interesting mirror image of the major foreign policy dilemmas that both Britain and Germany have had to navigate since the Second World War. Two interlinked problems have formed the backdrop of countless Königswinter debates over the last sixty-nine years: the German question, and Britain's complicated position regarding European integration.

Britain was not the only country which, in Dean Acheson's famous words, was trying to 'find a role' in the world after the Second World War. Looking back on a horrific and guilt-ridden past, the newly-founded Federal Republic of Germany had to define its place in the new world order, a matter of supreme importance to all parties in the emerging Cold War. This entailed wrestling with three questions which were heatedly discussed at Königswinter for decades, and which to this day remain relevant to German foreign policy making: Germany's role within the Western alliance, its relationship with Eastern Europe, and more specifically, Russia, and the consequences of German reunification.

The German question, debated in the wider context of the Cold War, dominated Königswinter during the 1950s. At a time when the Western and Eastern blocs were still consolidating, German rearmament and its integration into

NATO were not as self-evident as they appear in hindsight. Participants from both Britain and Germany repeatedly floated the idea of a reunified but neutralized Germany, a prospect that was only dismissed as completely unrealistic in 1962, after the construction of the Berlin Wall.[46] Germany's relations with Eastern Europe took centre stage at Königswinter in the late 1960s and 1970s against the backdrop of the new 'Ostpolitik' and détente.[47] The British participants broadly supported the FRG's attempt to work with the realities of the Cold War by normalizing its relations with the Soviet Union, as long as this did not entail a reduced German commitment to NATO.[48] In 1985, the Königswinter Conference was ahead of its time, when several British delegates made a case for contemplating the possibility of German reunification. These demands for a more 'visionary' policy were met with great caution on the German side. Not only did the idea of reunification seem unrealistic to the German delegates, there was also some concern that a boldly interest-driven foreign policy might trigger a dangerous revisionist backlash in Germany.[49]

From a German point of view, the two most relevant Königswinter Conferences were the one in Cambridge, convened in the spring of 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall but preceding German reunification, and the one held in Dresden in 1991. The personal encounters between British and German elites mattered greatly at a time when the momentous political changes in Germany were not purely a cause for jubilation, but also a reason for concern among her allies. The joint Steering Committee for the Cambridge conference convened only a few days after the Berlin Wall had come down. The atmosphere at this meeting was very awkward at first, but the tension soon dissolved when, in the words of a German participant, 'they could see that we were still the same.'[50] The conference programme was re-drafted from scratch to focus on 'Germany and Europe – Undivided'.[51]

The Foreign Office and the Auswärtige Amt had every reason to dread the 1990 gathering. Both Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl attended to speak after dinner, united in their hearty dislike of one another. Thatcher feared that reunification might alter Germany's commitment to the Western alliance or lead to a rekindled German chauvinism.[52] At the conference, she told Karl-Günther von Hase, the head of Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, that it would 'take us forty more years to forgive what you have done'.[53] She had instructed the organizers beforehand that she refused to be placed next to Kohl, prompting Sir Oliver Wright, chairman of the Steering Committee, to sit between them as a buffer.[54] Kohl, in turn, informed the German ambassador Hermann von Richthofen upon his arrival at the airport that he was in a very bad mood. The Chancellor had been greatly angered by an interview the Prime Minister had just given to Der Spiegel, a magazine he detested, and he assured Richthofen that he would have much preferred not having to deal with Thatcher at all.[55] Nevertheless, he used his dinner speech as an opportunity to assuage British fears that Germany might leave NATO after reunification.[56] The atmosphere between the two heads of government at the bilateral summit which followed the conference was a lot more civilized.[57]

*Karl-Günther von Hase*

Most of the British delegates in Cambridge did not share Thatcher's extreme reservations about German reunification.[58] Michael Heseltine, who would challenge the Prime Minister in a Tory leadership contest only a few months later, declared his support for reunification, and his trust in Germany, in his remarks to the plenary.[59] Another from the British point of view fascinating aspect of the 1990 conference was the attendance of four politicians from the GDR, who had been invited at the suggestion of the German members of the Steering Committee. Thatcher talked to these representatives of the Eastern

German 'bloc parties' privately after dinner, a meeting which left a profound impression on her. Several women who attended the conference recall how they bumped into Thatcher in the Ladies room, where she gave a vivid account of her conversation with the East Germans, expressing her surprise that, not only they were 'quite like us', they also 'all have different opinions'.[60]

*Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher*

The Königswinter Conference in Dresden in 1991, the first on German soil to be convened in Eastern Germany, was a highly symbolic occasion. It had been prepared in a tumultuous meeting of the joint Steering Committee. There had been profound disagreement on whether it was a good idea to gather in a place which carried the historic weight of the Second World War more than any other German city. Several Germans on the Steering Committee felt that it would be insensitive or even provocative to confront the British guests with the legacy of the bombing of Dresden.[61] In the end, the conference turned out to be a great success. Its duration had been extended to fit in several cultural events, and all participants, the Bishop of Coventry among them, attended a service of thanksgiving in the Kreuzkirche.[62] Both British and German delegates remember this service as a deeply moving moment where Anglo-German reconciliation and German reunification were celebrated in a manner which would have been inconceivable only a few years before.[63]

Given Germany's economic potential and geographic situation at the centre of Europe, it is unsurprising that British interest in Königswinter has steadily increased since reunification.[64] The fall of the iron curtain provided new circumstances for Germany's policies in Eastern Europe, but the fundamental dilemma remained, whether a good

working relationship with Russia presented a contradiction to Germany's commitment to the Western alliance. The conflict between the need for reliable energy supplies, and the heavy political price Russia has been trying to exact for them, continues to make this question pertinent today, as the controversy about Nord Stream 2 demonstrates.[65]

If the German question has constituted the proverbial elephant in the room in the history of Königswinter, so has Britain's position towards European integration. The British participants reassured their German counterparts at the conferences in the late 1950s that Britain's rejection of the Messina process did not signal a general disengagement from Europe.[66] Only a few years later, the situation had reversed. Britain was now trying to join the European Economic Community, but the veto of French president Charles De Gaulle made this impossible. Throughout the 1960s, Königswinter turned into a forum where the British delegates urged the Germans to exercise pressure on the French so that their veto would be lifted. The hope for Germany's support within the EEC was one of the reasons why the newly-founded Steering Committee made such a strong case for organizing every other Königswinter Conference in Britain.[67] The vast majority of German delegates were very much in favour of Britain joining the EEC, but they also stressed that there were limits to what they could do, as long as De Gaulle remained adamant. Foreign Secretary Willy Brandt bluntly stated in a speech in 1967 that 'French policies were not made in Bonn'.[68] This would not remain the last time that the British side felt frustrated by the Franco-German axis in Europe, notwithstanding continued German attempts to dispel those fears and talk up the importance of trilateral cooperation between Britain, France and Germany.

The success of Britain's third application for EEC membership in 1973, after De Gaulle had stepped down, was a cause for celebration at Königswinter.[69] One participant remembers the 1973 conference as 'a complete victory party'.[70] The harmony did not last long. The 1974 gathering, which was held in Edinburgh, was overshadowed by the announcement of the new Labour government to hold a referendum about British membership in the EEC. According to Gräfin Marion Dönhoff, editor of Die Zeit, this was the first time in decades that the delegates divided into national, rather than political camps at a Königswinter gathering.[71]

Once the question whether Britain should take part in the European project had been settled, at least for the time being, after the 1975 referendum, the terms of its membership took centre stage. In 1978, the CDU politician Richard von Weizsäcker attacked Britain's European policy in very strong terms, stating that De Gaulle might have been 'a great prophet', as far as his expectations that Britain could never become a constructive member of the EEC were concerned.[72] Shirley Williams, Secretary of State for Education and Science, issued a sharp rebuttal, arguing that the advocates of British EEC membership had 'won the referendum not because of an upsurge in pro-European feeling in Britain, but more because of a fear of being left alone in an increasingly unfriendly world'. German Anglophiles, instead of being too demanding, should count themselves lucky that Britain had not gone down the same road as Norway.[73]

Weizsäcker's and Williams' exchange reflected the gulf that has divided the British and the German approach towards European integration from its inception to the present day. For Germany, European integration has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy since the 1950s, a political as well as an economic project in a post-nationalist era of German history. In contrast, the British have embraced and promoted the projects of a Single Market and multilateral political cooperation but have

*Boris Johnson and Peter Altmaier at the 67th Königswinter Conference*

been much more concerned about the loss of national sovereignty that ever closer union within the EC/EU inevitably entails. This difference in opinion has been exacerbated by a mutual lack of tolerance for the priorities of the other side. The Germans have regularly interpreted Britain's sober and interest-driven pragmatism towards European integration as selfishness, whereas the British, Europhiles and Eurosceptics alike, have often criticized Germany's approach as a too emotional, or even irrational.[74]

The relevance of this underlying disagreement about the basis and aim of European integration grew in proportion to the extent that Anglo-German and Anglo-European relations became more and more entangled between 1975 and 2012.[75] It manifested itself in the Königswinter debates about the British rebate, monetary union, and the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties. When Prime Minister David Cameron announced his intention to hold an in-out referendum about British EU membership in 2013, discord about Europe achieved a new quality. German Königswinter participants were now faced with an ever-increasing division within the British delegations, a development which provided a new dynamic for Britain's European policy. Representing the most Eurosceptic side of the spectrum, the MP Douglas Carswell made a public splash by resigning the Tory whip after having attended the 2014 conference. He stressed that it was his experience at Königswinter which had convinced him to join UKIP. It was not the German participants, that had angered Carswell, but the British. He regarded the attempts by senior officials to calm their German counterparts about the prospect of an EU referendum as an expression of contempt for ordinary voters and British democracy.[76]

The two conferences of 2017 and 2018, which have followed the British vote to leave the EU have demonstrated the extent of the challenge that Brexit poses to the Anglo-German relationship, but also the resolve on both sides not to let their close bond snap under any circumstances. German frustration about the British decision has been significant and widely shared, as have been British expectations that Germany would support Britain more during the Brexit negotiations. Both sides have been forced to face a lot of disappointment. On the other hand, politicians and business people on both sides are very much aware of how much Germany and Britain matter to one another, especially in terms of economic and security interests.[77] The question remains how these joint interests can be secured, when it is, from a German point of view, extremely hard to follow the British suggestion to disentangle the Anglo-German from the Anglo-EU relationship.[78]

Understanding and agreement are not the same, but one is a necessary precondition of the other. Notwithstanding its flaws and limitations, Königswinter has provided British and German elites with a sense of realism regarding the relationship between their countries and their respective worldviews. At a time when both Britain and Germany are, once again, obliged to redefine their role in Europe and beyond as a result of the Brexit vote, the need for such a frank and informal bilateral exchange now appears greater than ever.

*Norbert Röttgen, Sir Simon McDonald and Douglas Carswell*

## Endnotes

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[4] Ralph Uhlig, Interview with Lilo Milchsack, Kieler Rundschau, 11 February 1982.

[5] Interview with Rachael Hetherington, 21 February 2019.

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[15] Heinz Koeppler to Lilo Milchsack, 21 April 1950, Debrige Collections.
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[18] Tätigkeitsbericht über die Aktivitäten der Deutsch-Englischen Gesellschaft vom 1.10.1950 bis zum 1.10.1951, Debrige Collections.
[19] Ralph Uhlig, Interview with Lilo Milchsack, Kieler Rundschau, 11 February 1982.
[20] Interview with Jackie Newbury, London, 30 January 2019.
[21] Selwyn Lloyd to Major C.E. Mott-Radclyffe, 14 March 1952, National Archives (NA): FO 371/99847.
[22] Tätigkeitsbericht über die Aktivitäten der Deutsch-Englischen Gesellschaft vom 1.10.1951 bis zum 1.10.1952, Debrige Collections.
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[32] Interview with Manfred Eisenbach, 7. March 2019.
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[35] Interview with Sir Paul Lever, 29 January 2019.
[36] Interview with Jackie Newbury, 30 January 2019.
[37] Interview with Maxine Vlieland, 28 January 2019.
[38] Interview with Baroness Falkner of Margravine, 7 March 2019.
[39] Interview with Maxine Vlieland, 28 January 2019.
[40] Interview with Ruprecht Brandis, 20 February 2019.
[41] Interview with Thomas Matussek, 18 February 2019.
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[47] Interview with Theo Sommer, 1 March 2019.
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## Impressions from Königswinter

*Richard Löwenthal and Axel von dem Bussche*

*Sir Oliver Wright, William Wallace, Egon Bahr and François Duchêne*

*Lenelotte von Bothmer, Karl Kaiser and Lothar Rühl*

*Richard von Weizsäcker, Robert Mathew and Peter Tennant*

*Lilo Milchsack, Annemarie Renger, Lord Callaghan*

*Prof. Dr. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Douglas Hurd and Hans-Dietrich Genscher*

*Lady Grimond, Rolf Seelmann-Eggebert, Denis Healy, Sir Oliver Wright, Dr. Hermann Freiherr von Richthofen*

*HRM Queen Elizabeth II on her visit to Berlin in 1992 with Sir Christopher Mallaby*

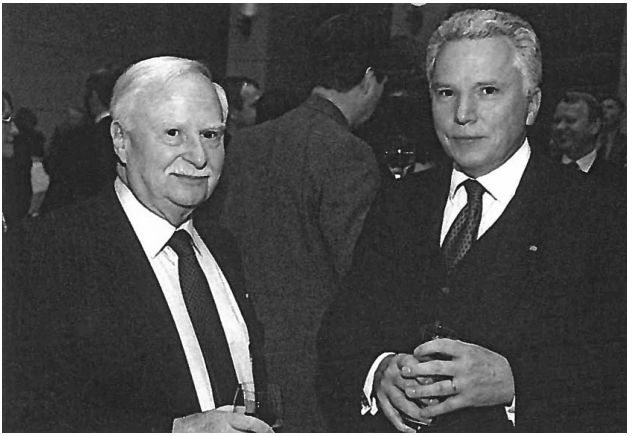
*Roman Herzog and Henrik Schmiegelow*

*Prof. Dr. Karl Carstens and Lord Callaghan*

*HRH The Duke of Kent, Sir Paul Lever, Dr. Hermann Freiherr von Richthoven and Dr. Jürgen Peters at the 50 years anniversary of the DEG in 1999*

*Lady Broomfield, Sir Nigel Broomfield, Sir Paul Lever, HRH The Duke of Kent*

*Hans von Stein and Dr. Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz*



*Judy Dempsey and Baroness Chalker*

*Timothy Garton Ash, Thomas Kielinger and Roger Morgan*


*Wolfgang Ischinger and Lord Watson of Richmond*

*Gebhardt von Moltke and Horst Köhler*

*Dr. Edwina Moreton, Joan MacNaughton and Lady Judge*

*Frances O'Grady, Dominic Grieve, Baroness Falkner of Margravine, Dr. Cornelius Huppertz and Prof. Dr. Heinz Bude*

*Baroness Falkner of Margravine and Norbert Röttgen*

*Philip Hammond speaking at the 67th Königswinter Conference, 2017*


*Heiko Maas and Sir Simon McDonald at the 68th Königswinter Conference, 2018*

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*'My opinion of Königswinter is similar to Voltaire's relationship with God: If it did not exist, I would have to invent it.'*
Sir Simon McDonald KCMG, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

*'In times of Brexit, we need to make use of every available tool that can help us ensure Germany's close cooperation with our British friends. Königswinter is a vital channel of communication.'*
Thomas Matussek, German Ambassador to London (2002–2006)