



AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

German Unification: Result of an Historical Process and a Task for Present and Future. East Germans, the Peaceful Revolution, and its Consequences

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In October 1990, with the establishment of a unified Germany, a two-hundred year old dispute came to a close on how to resolve the German question in Europe. The question has existed since the Napoleonic wars: how might it be possible to form a unified, democratic Germany from a conglomeration of many small and some large German states in the middle of Europe. Unity and freedom were the goal and the challenge. The new united Federal Republic of Germany is a unified and free country. It has secure and clearly defined boundaries and no territorial claims against other states. Today, this country represents the democratic German state. The solution to the German question is also the result of the events of autumn 1989 in the GDR, which in the last year of its existence actually transformed into a democratic republic.

I witnessed the symbolic act of the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 in Berlin. I also participated in the largest-ever protest demonstration in East Germany of more than 500,000 people in East Berlin at Alexanderplatz, held five days before the Wall was opened, on 4 November. With this demonstration, it was irrevocably apparent that the old GDR government and political system had lost all legitimacy in the population of the GDR. This path allowed the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, the opening of the Brandenburg Gate on 22 December 1989, the first free elections in East Germany on 18 March 1990, and the formation of a democratic parliament in the GDR (which was called the *Volkskammer* of the GDR).

On 23 August 1990, the *Volkskammer* voted for the accession of the GDR to the territory of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. That was the official act establishing the national unity of the Germans from East to West. I was also actively involved in this decision—which happened at 2:30 in the morning—and present in the parliament. So for me it is still simultaneously a deep happiness and surprise to have witnessed and taken part in historic world processes, which ultimately culminated in the establishment of Germany's national unity on 3 October 1990. We will celebrate the 20th anniversary of this momentous event on 3 October 2010.

However, it is particularly important for me to not forget all that happened on 9 November in German history. I refer here to the 9th of November, 1938. That was the date of the so-called *Reichspogromnacht* (others called it *Reichskristallnacht* or Night of Broken Glass), which was an important step toward the Holocaust. Thus, every year the 9th of November is not just a day of joy for me because of the fall of the Wall, but also a day of mourning and commemoration of the murdered Jews of Europe.

The developments in Germany since 1989 are not unambiguously positive, especially for many eastern Germans, but rather ambivalent. One can rejoice over the enormous investments in infrastructure in eastern Germany and over the economic success in some areas of the eastern German economy, which have succeeded in giving new faces to many towns and cities in eastern Germany, and the good and friendly relationships with the neighbors of the new Germany. Without German unification and the great support from West Germany, that would not have been possible.

But the Federal Republic of Germany has proven to be poorer and weaker than many eastern Germans expected or wanted, as they expressed when they voted for the parties in the free elections for the *Volkskammer* that wanted a quick way to integrate with the Federal Republic.

We know the numbers and problems. The official and unofficial unemployment rates in eastern Germany are on average at least three times as large as in western Germany. The average income in eastern Germany is more than 30 percent lower for the same work in western Germany. Purchasing power is significantly lower; in the long run, pensions will also

be much lower in the future, despite being based on an equally long and comparable working life. The risk of poverty in eastern Germany is much higher than in the west. This list could be continued with other examples and descriptions.

In all this, there is still little agreement on how the character of the German Republic should be described today, how its inner self and spiritual composition should be portrayed. Prejudices and negative reviews hang in the air. For example, Maxim Biller writes in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "It is time to determine the communication once again so that the easternized *Wessis* [western Germans] will become the reasonable, unpatriotic people that they once were. And when 'we' are again okay, we will certainly turn 'them,' the *Ossis* [eastern Germans] also into better people. Because they cannot do it on their own."¹ There is a positively charged idealistic longing for the old west, the old Federal Republic. The eastern Germans are implicitly, and often explicitly, told that they are different than the western Germans in their core, that the new Federal Republic of Germany, through unification, has become more nationalistic, authoritarian, and poorer through the high costs of integrating East Germany into the West.

But how could the behavior of many eastern Germans have been otherwise, given the history of Soviet occupation and the GDR, which was not a country independent of the Soviet Union?

Thus, a dispute rages in Germany over the interpretation of what happened there in 1989 and thereafter, of how to evaluate the events of upheaval and the peaceful revolution—and what they mean historically and for the future of Germany. This dispute is usually not carried out in the media, newspapers, television, and the like, but in other circles. The actors in the events often do not have the privilege of interpretation over 1989's place in European and world history. It often has passed on to individual and small groups of eastern Germans and larger and more influential groups of people from the west. For many years, a feeling of outside evaluation has spread throughout eastern Germany. This assessment is seen as a largely inaccurate understanding of their own history. Furthermore, it often culminates in the sarcastically-colored conclusion noting that people who have not lived in the east understand equally or even better "how we lived." This has of course much to do with access to opinion-forming media, but is also a reaction to real conditions. Who, for example, has influential positions in eastern Germany? Whose interests do they represent?

The result is a largely distorted perception of the events, the major players, and the processes that took place. Even now, twenty years later, between 70 and 80 percent of eastern Germans believe they are treated as second class citizens. Are those only eastern German complexes, without any real basis?

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a globally historic occurrence because it finally ended the division of Germany and marked the end of the division of Europe and the world opposing each other in two blocs of contrasting powers and influences.

The fall of the Wall was like a miracle. This, at least, was how many people perceived it.

Perhaps an even bigger miracle was that all of these changes were occurring peacefully. Peaceful meant that those who aspired to radical changes in East Germany did not utilize or plan violence and that the GDR regime and its representatives at various levels did not apply force after October 1989 in order to harm or even destroy the opposition. No dissidents were shot, no Communists were hanged. In dicey situations, a peaceful way out was always found in this country, whose military and security forces were massively armed.

The question of who built the Wall and was responsible for its existence is certainly important when one is celebrating the fall of the Wall. In the discussions after 1990, it is often considered an invention of the GDR ruler, Walter Ulbricht, and his secretary in charge of the construction of the Wall, Erich Honecker. Both played a key role before and during the construction of the Wall, but as one might have already known and as has been substantiated through uncovered documents, the then-Party Chief of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, commissioned the construction of the Wall. This is not really a new message because the Soviet Union was essentially the founder of the GDR in the particular world-historical context of the Cold War and was interested in securing the livelihood of its protégé. In addition, the Soviet Union had huge armies and their families stationed in East Germany, about 400,000 soldiers. The GDR, even if it wanted to, had no other choice. Later, former Soviet officials, including the longtime governor of the Soviet Union in the GDR and USSR Ambassador to the GDR, Pyotr Abrassimov, among others, claimed that East Germany was solely responsible for the construction of the Berlin Wall. Those were political statements intended to portray the individuals' roles in a better light, and to place responsibility for the oppressive system in the GDR on others. I also believe, therefore, the "Two plus Four" Agreement and the agreement to withdraw all Soviet troops from eastern Germany by 1994 is one of the most important successes of the peaceful unification of Germany. To this day there has been no Russian politician wanting to take responsibility for the violence and repression in the GDR, let alone willing to apologize to eastern Germans. For many East Germans the experience of 17 June 1953, was very formative. On that day, Soviet tanks and armed soldiers violently

¹ Maxim Biller, "Die Ossifizierung des Westens," *FAZ*, 21 March 2009.

crushed the broad protest movement in East Germany and more than ninety people were sentenced to death and executed. After that time it was known in the GDR that anyone who wanted to enact changes of a fundamental nature in East Germany could expect the violent intervention of the Soviet Union. That was another reason the widespread yearning for change and democratization, even in the SED and its associated bloc parties in the 1980s, was not expressed more strongly in the GDR.

All this also has other historical circumstances. In April 1945, U.S. troops reached those areas of Germany that would later become the Soviet-dominated GDR. Erfurt, Weimar, the Bauhaus town Dessau, and even Leipzig, which emitted such a powerful signal of the democratic will of East Germans (“We are the people”) on 9 October 1989, were liberated from the Nazi dictatorship by U.S. forces. This affected millions of Germans in this part of the former German Reich.

Then the Americans withdrew. Later, the U.S. established diplomatic relations with the GDR, opening an embassy in 1974 in East Berlin, and ultimately supported the inclusion of the GDR in the United Nations. All of these were adaptations to the geopolitical situation and above all a result of the relationship between the two major world superpowers in the second half of the twentieth century. What would have become of the people of East Germany if the Americans had stayed? Can we blame the East Germans, in light of these developments, that they adapted to a political system that they could change just as little as the U.S. could change the geopolitical situation over a long period of time? Millions of East Germans had been turned over to the Soviets. This was the reality. Nobody can be blamed for this; it was part of fulfilling the agreement made with the Soviet Union when the U.S. and USSR were allies in the anti-Hitler coalition.

These agreements also led to West Berlin being controlled by the Western Allies. This reality unfolded and again had significant influence on the fact that, decades later, unification of the amputated Germany—with new borders and on a much smaller territory—could take place.

The price of defeat, however, was historically paid in large part by the East Germans. They were first and foremost objects of the developments until autumn 1989. In the autumn of 1989, however, they were subjects and actors and liberated themselves. But after the fall of the Wall and the free elections in the GDR of 18 March 1990, they were again more and more objects and not subjects of developments. Many people from the opposition, who are now popularly called former “civil rights activists” but were rather former “freedom activists,” complained about this.

The dramatic changes in the period from October 1989 to October 1990 are based on an entire complex of factors that first made these changes possible. The policy of the West and the United States, the new politics of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev since 1985, and the new *Ostpolitik* of the Federal Republic of Germany under Chancellor Willy Brandt and continued under his successors, Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl, all contributed to these changes. The developments in the communist countries that led to the emergence of opposition movements also contributed to the changes. In Poland, an opposition movement developed comprised of about ten million trade union members. In the GDR in the 1980s, the emergence of small opposition groups did not grow beyond a few dozen members. Naturally, the repressive work of “State Security” was also responsible for this. There was no freedom for the opposition.

Since 1989 and the subsequent events, the Federal Republic has become in many ways a different republic. Its basic political structure has not changed substantially through the integration of the GDR. The people of the GDR were able to preserve and strengthen their freedom for which they fought and acquired in the autumn of 1989. The Federal Republic has become more European and at the same time more self-confident through unification. But Germans have also had to accept restrictions or narrowing of their fundamental rights in many areas, especially in the context of the fight against international terrorism. This relates to Article 16 (Right of Asylum), Article 2 (Personal Freedoms), but also a number of other fundamental rights of the Basic Law.

Internal reconciliation would make Germany’s external reconciliation, including with its European neighbors, more viable and credible. Reconciliation is one of many unfinished and hotly contested tasks twenty years after the fall of the Wall. Debates still arise, as in May 2009, when Gesine Schwan, a two-time narrowly defeated presidential candidate in Germany, portrayed a differentiated analysis and assessment of the character of the GDR and claimed that a simple, undistinguished identification of the GDR as an unjust state is unfair. She was then accused, for example, of playing down the dictatorship in the GDR not only by much of the (often simplified) media, but also by political opponents from the ranks of the CDU and CSU, as well as the FDP. The same “fate” befell the Prime Minister of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, as well as the Prime Minister of Brandenburg, for demanding reconciliation as a political task. In addition, the government of the state of Brandenburg considers it legitimate to form a government with the Left Party, just as has existed for many years in the capital of Berlin. Helmut Schmidt, the former chancellor, even stated that the GDR’s SED party members were and are treated worse in western Germany after unification than the former Nazis, including the SS and the secret police, were treated in the old Federal Republic of Adenauer and his government. He thinks this is wrong.

It seems in these days of remembrance of the fall of the Berlin Wall that the further in history the GDR disappears, the more it is portrayed as more ailing and broken and evil than it was. The considerable differences between the GDR and the most brutal dictatorships in the Soviet bloc after World War II, for example in Romania, are thus becoming more and more invisible.

You can also read, for example, that the productivity of the East German economy was only 13 to 20 percent that of the productivity in the former Federal Republic of Germany. Years ago it was at least twice that. These calculations are now hardly comprehensible. But something else is more important. Does anyone else believe that it is precisely this type of approach that is responsible for many eastern Germans' sense of devaluation of their life achievements? Accomplishments that were achieved despite or perhaps precisely because of the worse starting conditions after 1945.

The GDR had to pay reparations for all of Germany to the Soviet Union. West Germany, however, received assistance under the Marshall Plan. Considered in that sense, East Germans' performance shines in a different light. The people in East Germany also rebuilt a destroyed country after World War II—which had been caused by the Germans themselves. Their achievements and their will were diminished by an ineffective and often absurd planned economy system and dictatorial decisions. As a result, many developed an art of adaptation that has now, for a democratic system of political participation, become obsolete.

Red socks campaigns, i.e., anti-communist campaigns after the end of Stalinist communism, or the political use of information provided by informal members of the State Security Forces (so-called *Stasi-IM*) created new problems and proved to be counterproductive. However, this exploitation continues to reemerge to this day. I need only recall the forced resignation of the first and last freely-elected Prime Minister of the GDR, Lothar de Maizière, from his later office as a Federal Minister in the Kohl government (Lothar de Maizière was, by the way, the only significant GDR politician who was ever received in the Oval Office by an American president). Or, I remember the disgraceful and false allegations about writer Stefan Heym as he prepared to become the chairman by seniority of the newly elected parliament of the Federal Republic in 1994, which the then-Minister of the Interior sought to prevent with Stasi accusations. But that was, at least in this case, unsuccessful.

Exploiting peoples' preoccupation with this part of the German and European history for political expediency is not helpful. Political exploitation for the purpose of fighting political opposition leads, particularly in eastern Germany, to an extension of that very culture of conformity that was practiced for forty years in the GDR and does not lead to a "rejection of the principle and logic of the separation" (as the opposition group "Democracy Now" called its founding manifesto), which the groups of freedom activists co-founded by Wolfgang Ullmann in September 1989 and others at the time had especially demanded. I mention Wolfgang Ullmann because he was among the strongest opposition members, intellectually and politically, that the GDR had ever produced and as such played a prominent role in both the dramatic process of change in 1989 and thereafter. He was and remained until his death a few years ago an independent thinker and politician.

The preoccupation with the totality of the history of the GDR means to understand the crimes that were committed there, but also with the historical context and the hopes that so many anti-fascist and victims of the Nazi dictatorship, as well as liberal-oriented socialists, placed in the GDR in the beginning must, above all, not stop. A final line cannot be drawn here.

So, too, can the happy moment when the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989 and the upcoming 20th anniversary of the unification of Germany on 3 October 2010 remind us of the hope that the GDR initially and in the time of transformation from the downthrow of GDR Leader Erich Honecker until unification represented for eastern Germany.

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