

AFTER THE WALL: 20 YEARS ON

Oliver Marc Hartwich looks at Germany's unification history

Twenty years ago, the Germans were the 'happiest people on Earth.' This is how Walter Momper, the mayor of Berlin, summed up the mood when he addressed a crowd gathered outside West Berlin's Town Hall the day after the Wall had been opened.

For nearly three decades, the monstrosity of the Wall had torn apart friends, families and lovers. It was an inhumane scar running right through the heart of Berlin. Where once there had been vibrant streets and town squares, the death strip had turned the city centre into an eerie no-man's land.

The Wall had been built by the communist rulers of East Germany in August 1961 as more and more people were leaving behind oppression and misery for a better life in the West. In order to prevent the East German state from bleeding out, the East German government had closed the border. First with barbed wire and improvised brickwork, then with a technology that turned the whole of East Germany into one big prison. Watchtowers, spring guns, tank traps, guard dogs, and landmines made the German-German border an almost impenetrable barrier.

I had visited Berlin in 1988, almost exactly a year before the fall of the Wall. When I remember looking across the Wall from one of the many viewing platforms on the Western side, it still sends shivers down my spine. The border was secured with brutal perfection.

Since the Berlin Wall had been built in August 1961, at least 255 people had died trying to cross it. Another 617 people were killed along the 1,378 km long inner German border and the Baltic Sea. Most of the victims were shot, many drowned, and some bled to death.

When we commemorate the events of 9 November 1989, our first thought should be with these victims of the Wall.

They died because they wanted to be free.

We should not forget the other victims of the East German regime, either. The people whose lives were ruined by the secret police; whose ambitions were thwarted because they did not conform to the communist ideology; who were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their beliefs.

The 9th of November signalled the end of their suffering. It quite literally opened the gates to a new life.

For these reasons, the Germans were indeed the happiest people on Earth in those November days of 1989. The end of the second German dictatorship of the twentieth century was a blessing that could not be celebrated enough.

But what made the fall of the Wall even more remarkable was the way that it happened. It was not a revolution from above but a peaceful revolution of the people of East Germany. First, they voted with their feet by leaving the country through Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In tens of thousands, East Germans took to the streets of Leipzig and Berlin demanding freedom and

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political rights. And ultimately they pulled down the Wall from the East.

I was a 14-year-old high school student in West Germany when all of this happened. I recall spending hours glued to the TV watching history unfold in front of my eyes. Soon the first Trabis, these comically designed East German cars, were rattling through my home town of Essen. We suddenly had to get used to hearing Saxon accents not only on TV but sometimes even in the street.

It was a remarkable, fascinating time, and a time of great joy.

But when I look back over the 20 years that have passed since the Fall of the Wall, I cannot help feeling saddened by what has happened to Germany since. And it is certainly not some kind of nostalgia because there is nothing to feel nostalgic about the years of division. Rather, Germany has missed a massive opportunity. Instead of making the most of its regained freedom, it soon started to lose it in the process of unification. Neither the political left nor the political right had the policies needed to make the process of unification a social and economic success.

The embarrassing failure of the Left

That Germany's unification cannot be called a complete success is not least a failure of West Germany's lack of preparation for the events of 1989. In hindsight, it is astonishing how ill-prepared the West Germans were for East Germany's collapse. Maybe it was the monstrosity of the Wall that made it seem as if nothing could ever change the country's inner division.

If you had asked the West Germans before 1989 about the chances of re-unification, the older ones would have told you that it was not going to happen in their lifetime. The younger ones would not even have understood the question. An opinion poll among West Germans in 1987 revealed that 97% believed re-unification was not going to happen anytime soon.¹

As a West German born after the War you would have grown up—and become used to—the reality of German division. East Germany would have been quite an exotic place to you. In all likelihood, the average West German of 1989 would have spent much more time in Spain, France or Italy than in Thuringia or Saxony. He would

have known his way around Capri or Tuscany but not around Rügen or Mecklenburg.

To many of West Germany's politicians, the idea of re-unification had also lost its appeal. Lip service was paid to it once a year on the national holiday, the Day of German Unity, but such celebrations had become empty rituals. Only a minority knew why it was celebrated on 17 June, and even fewer really believed in the cause. For many West Germans, 17 June, which was meant to commemorate the uprising in East Berlin of 1953, had become just another work-free day that marked the beginning of the barbecue season.

The West German political Left had distanced itself from the idea of a united Germany. In the late 1980s, the Social Democrats attempted to cut funding for the Central Registry of State Judicial Administrations in Salzgitter, which documented and verified human rights violations by the East German government. This coincided with attempts by the party leadership to cooperate with the East German Communist Party, which culminated in the publication of a joint declaration in 1987: 'Our hope cannot be that one system replaces the other.'²

Even when the cracks in Eastern Europe became clearly visible in 1989, the West German Left did not understand the significance of the events for Germany. In June 1989, Gerhard Schröder (the future Chancellor), said, 'After 40 years of the Federal Republic we should no longer tell lies to the new generation about the chances of re-unification: there are none.'³ And Joschka Fischer, a leading Green politician who would later become Foreign Minister, said in September 1989: 'Let's forget reunification! Why don't we just shut up about it for the next twenty years?'⁴

In wide parts of the political Left, national division had not only been accepted as the status quo of German politics. More than that, it had been embraced almost as a moral necessity. Hans Eichel, a Social Democrat who went on to become a State Premier and Federal Treasurer, wrote in November 1989: 'Those who currently talk about re-unification have learnt nothing from history.'⁵

The person who most clearly expressed this view of the Left was none other than Günter Grass. The author of *The Tin Drum*, who would later be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature,

had always styled himself as the moral conscience of the nation. In February 1990, Grass gave a speech in which he expressed his disgust at the thought of a united Germany. ‘Whoever currently thinks about Germany and tries to find answers to the German Question has to keep Auschwitz in mind. The place of horror, mentioned here as an example of the remaining trauma, precludes a future unitary state.’⁶

For Grass, national division was the just punishment for Auschwitz—and wasn’t it convenient that Westerns like him could enjoy all the prosperity and freedom they wanted while leaving it to the Easterners to pay the price for National Socialism? Or maybe he thought that life in the East was not that bad. Grass later euphemised the East German state as a ‘commodious dictatorship’ and, when criticised for this, justified his words by pointing out that other dictatorships had been worse.

The West German Left was closing its eyes to the tyranny in the East, and some left-wingers probably admired this practical experiment in building a socialist society on German soil. Besides, they believed that the mere existence of East Germany would help tame capitalism in the West.⁷

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This view was also shared by left-wing Christian Democrats like Germany’s long-serving Social Security Minister Norbert Blüm. He remarked that the demise of socialism in the East was ultimately the reason why Western welfare states had come under pressure. Capitalism, he argued, was forced to show that it was ‘a more social system’ when it still faced a challenge from the socialist East.⁸

Bleeding hearts like Blüm and the German Left thus have every reason to mourn the loss of the East German dictatorship because it robbed them of their best argument for greater redistribution in the West. Does it ever occur to them how cynical this is?

The economic naiveté of the Right

If the West German Left’s attitude towards unification can only be called embarrassing, the Right’s view on unification was not much better, either. Where the Left was less than enthusiastic about the fall of the Wall and the prospect of re-unification, conservatives welcomed it with a mixture of political calculation and economic naiveté.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who had led West Germany’s centre-right government since 1982, is usually seen as the great architect of German unity. Not least Kohl himself sees his own role in the process of unification as that of a visionary statesman, driven by high ideals and a good degree of patriotism.⁹ Reality, however, was perhaps a bit less glamorous.

By the summer of 1989, Kohl’s chancellorship was hanging by a thread. His party had lost a series of state elections, and members of his own inner circle were unsuccessfully trying to oust him from the Chancellery. Opinion polls for Kohl were disastrous.

That was when suddenly things started to happen in the East. The peaceful revolution in East Germany and the fall of the Wall surprised Kohl as much as everybody else. In the immediate weeks after these historic events, Kohl appeared utterly clueless. Should he try to stabilise the East German state? Could he prevent a mass exodus of East Germans to the West? How should he deal with fears abroad about the rise of a new and much more powerful Germany?

In the end, Kohl decided to grasp the opportunity that history had presented him—not only to unite Germany but also to save his own political career. The recipe was simple: He promised everything to everyone. To the East, he pledged ‘blossoming landscapes.’ Within three or four years, Kohl argued, East Germany would have been turned, almost magically, into a land as prosperous as the West. And what did he promise the West Germans? That all these policies would not cost much.

Kohl’s strategy worked wonders for him. He entered the history books as the statesman who united Germany—a twentieth century version of Bismarck, if you like. And instead of losing the next election, he remained Chancellor until

1998, making him the longest serving head of government in the Federal Republic's history, even overtaking the legendary Konrad Adenauer.

There was only a slight problem with Helmut Kohl's approach to unification: His over-optimistic promises were not only unrealistic but they were also the reason for much dissatisfaction in both East and West for years, if not decades, to come.

Economically, the East has undoubtedly improved but at a much slower pace than Kohl had predicted. Besides, the transformation from a communist command-style economy to a market economy did not happen without hardship or pain. Unemployment and welfare dependency in East Germany is still much higher than in the West. Is it any wonder that many East Germans feel disillusioned today?

Meanwhile, in the West dissatisfaction with the results of unification is equally widespread. And again, it derives from Kohl's hollow promises. First, he pretended that unification would be costless. Then he tried to hide the real costs as well as he could by making the welfare state carry a great part of the burden. But as time went by, the true costs could no longer be denied, and they are staggering indeed. According to a study by the Free University of Berlin, the total net cost of unification between 1990 and 2009 was €1.6 trillion. Transfers from West to East remain substantial even today, amounting to about 4% of GDP per year.¹⁰ These numbers are much higher than anyone would have forecast in 1989.

The real tragedy: unity before liberty

Germany's reunification became a political drama between the Left, who was unprepared to embrace it, and the Right, who were exploiting the events to remain in office.

The real victim was liberty.

In the immediate years after World War II, West Germany had been a remarkably liberal country in economic terms. Thanks to its first economics minister, Ludwig Erhard, the country went for a free-market order that stood in clear contrast to, say, Clement Attlee's socialist and Keynesian experiments in post-War Britain.

However, the West German welfare state had been expanded throughout the 1970s and 1980s, so that by the time of the fall of the Wall, West Germany was in need of reform. Public debt had

climbed steadily, unemployment had risen, and taxes were high and complicated. Furthermore, it was becoming increasingly obvious that West Germany's social security systems had become far too generous and needed to be cut back to restore a climate favourable to economic growth.

Unlike Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, or indeed Bob Hawke and Roger Douglas, Kohl had never been an economic reformer. Where other countries were modernising their economies, Kohl preferred to play it safe and muddle through.

It is quite possible that without the country's unification, West Germany would have eventually woken up to this reform backlog. Instead, unification dominated domestic politics and the political agenda for years.

Worse still, Kohl's promises had the unfortunate result of extending the bloated West German welfare state, its regulatory regime, and complicated tax law onto East Germany. And by burdening the social security systems with a big chunk of the costs of German unification, Kohl erected enormous obstacles to creating employment.

The perverse result of these policies was this: the East Germans fought for liberty and eventually brought down the Wall. But what they got in the end was not a free country but a struggling welfare state. And it is struggling not only but also because of the integration of the East German economy into a united Germany.

The liberation of East Germany from decades of totalitarian dictatorship was a blessing. The chance to unite the nation against much domestic resistance is an achievement for which Kohl deserves full credit. But the practical policies initiated by his government have turned a revolution for freedom into an evolution of the welfare state.

Despite all the joys over the fall of the Wall, this was a missed opportunity of historic proportions.