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The Fall of the Wall - 30 years on

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Thirty years ago, on 9th November 1989, the spokesman of the East German Politburo, Günter Schabowski, made his infamous statement that East German citizens were able to visit the West— 'sofort, unverzüglich' ('immediately, without delay'). Without knowing it, he removed the one brick from the Berlin Wall that would lead it to crumble down within days, if not hours. More than 140 people had died trying to cross the Wall in Berlin in the 28 years of its existence. The fall of the Wall sped up a process that would lead, in less than a year, to the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the unification of Germany, and vitally contribute to the end of the Cold War. The 9th of November 1989 was undoubtedly one of those days in history that shook the world.

This paper will provide a short overview of the events around 11/9 1989 and will then assess where Germany stands 30 years on by looking at both its domestic situation and international position. Germany being arguably the biggest (and perhaps only) winner of the end of the Cold War, this paper will examine how the country has fared since its division had come to an official end.

Protests and Diplomacy – 1989/1990

At the beginning of 1989, few people would have assumed that within a year, the East German regime would be shaken to its roots and German unification could be within reach. When 1989 started, the Cold War seemed as cemented as it had been for the past four decades. While the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev to the role of leader of the Soviet Union in 1985 had brought with it his promises of reform (glasnost and perestroika), US President Ronald Reagan had geared up his rhetoric towards the Soviet Union and the Cold War very much continued. In the GDR, the regime was preparing to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the East German state on 7th October 1949. Within the parameters of the Cold War, it was business as usual. Underneath the surface, though, certain cracks had appeared; fissures that can only really be appreciated in retrospect. Strikes and protests in Poland, for instance, had shown the dissatisfaction with Communist rule, and despite the declaration of a state of martial law, once the genie of protests was out of the bottle, it would never really go back in again. Gorbachev's own promises of change further encouraged people striving for reforms all across the Eastern bloc. Within the GDR, the gerontocratic leadership in the politburo despised Gorbachev's reform programme and stoically tried to block out any trickling in of such thoughts. Soviet publications were banned and the press censorship reinforced. At first, the protest remained shallow, until the summer of 1989 when thousands of people decided to turn their backs on the GDR and tried to escape to West Germany, but not through the normal route across the Wall in Berlin or in the countryside. This time they found, what they hoped, were safer routes. They flooded into the West German embassies in Prague and other eastern capitals and their numbers, and the attention this received in global news, meant that the GDR leadership would finally allow them to travel to West Germany (via GDR territory). Likewise, demonstrations took off across the GDR, normally on Mondays. East Germany's leader, Erich Honecker and his comrades, however, remained determined not to give way. Words of advice allegedly uttered by Gorbachev to his East German 'brothers' during the 40th anniversary celebrations – 'those who are late will be punished by life itself' – did nothing to change this mood. Minor proposals for reforms were debated within the politburo as small concessions to the protestors; and with the conviction that these would soon wither away. These were misguided calculations, however, and as the protests continued, it was made clear to Erich Honecker that he had to step down. In a clearly orchestrated - and Moscow-approved – coup on 18 October 1989, Egon Krenz took over. Schabowski's statement on 9th



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November was not even meant to detail the new travel plans envisioned, plans that were hardly designed to be as radical as his statement and subsequent interview questions were soon perceived to be by East Germans. Following the statement, some courageous East Berliners flocked to the checkpoints into the West and informed completely startled border guards of the new policy. No instructions had been given to them – as after all no immediate change, and certainly none of this revolutionary nature, had been planned by the GDR leadership. But finally the border guards gave in to the pressure of ever more people trying to cross into the West and opened the gates. What followed is history. Against this momentum, the GDR leadership could not stop this development with anything save for Soviet tanks, and Gorbachev made it clear that this time – as opposed to 1953 – those tanks would not roll. Within a few days, the Wall was coming down and so too was the old East German leadership. Krenz was soon succeeded by Hans Modrow and his main task was now to prepare the ground for the first and only democratic elections in East Germany. Those brought Lothar de Maizière into office and his agenda too, would soon be dominated by negotiations on the end of his state and the reunification with West Germany.

Internationally, the fall of the Wall catapulted the long-dormant issue of German unification back onto the international agenda. Few people were prepared for this. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl seized control of the agenda by outlining his own plans for the future relationship between East and West Germany. His 10-Point-Programme planned a step-by-step approach of the gradual realignment of both Germanys towards a future confederation of both states and ultimately, the prospect of unity within one state. This plan, agreed only with US President George Bush Sr but no other international partner, and only known to a select few of his own ministers, was soon overtaken by events. East Germans continued to migrate towards the West and it became clear that the only way to stop this haemorrhage of people from the GDR was through expedited steps towards unification. For this, however, the consent of the major victors of World War Two – the US, USSR, UK and France – was needed and those seemed hardly inclined to grant it. The US were the most supportive of unification, with the condition, however, that the united Germany had to be part of NATO. Naturally, this was not a notion that the USSR was likely to agree to and contentious negotiations started. France and the UK were also opposed. French President François Mitterrand was concerned about unification and first tried to put the brakes on the process. Yet, he came to realise that the only way to influence the process and to mould the outcome to France's favour was to get on board with negotiations. He contracted concessions in the form of expedited steps towards a European Union and Germany being locked into a European currency – the birth of the Euro – from Kohl in exchange for his *oui* to German unity. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was less amenable and saw the spectre of a united, powerful, and aggressive Germany on the horizon. She remained in opposition to the process of unification to the end but she was soon side-lined. The major obstacle to overcome now was the matter of Germany's membership in NATO. After several summits and debates as well as promises of billions of Deutschmark to the Soviets, Gorbachev – for reasons still unknown – agreed to the united Germany's continuous membership in NATO at a summit with Bush in the summer of 1989. With this stumbling block removed, history took its course. The legal aspects of unity between the two Germanys were negotiated amongst them and the four victors of WW II (the 2+4 process), and on 3rd October 1990, the country was finally reunited after 45 years of division. But unification was in itself only the beginning of a new process: that of Germany's internal unification, and that of Germany's coming to terms with the new role it had to play in a dramatically different world. Both processes were at times painful, certainly controversial, and are still ongoing. But where do we stand now, 30 years after this historic night in November?

Germany, 30 years after 11/9

Domestically, much has changed in Germany in the past 30 years. The Wall has now been down longer than it had been standing and more than a whole generation never knew a divided Germany. Living standards have also been improving but eastern Germany is still lagging behind on many fronts. The process of integrating a completely different economic, political, and social system into the unified Germany was not an easy endeavour and one accompanied by many problems. No blueprint existed for this process either, and on the whole, it was managed without any major upheavals and protests (something that could have easily occurred). Certainly, West Germany's economic prowess helped, much like the fact that of the eastern European states, the GDR was still the most economically developed one. Yet, the disruptions that unification brought to many personal lives can be felt still. Many jobs and employers disappeared almost overnight, and whole careers and life trajectories changed just as quickly. Nostalgia spread too, although much of it has just as much to do with missing one's youth, than with missing a system that looked much nicer and cosier the



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more historically distant it becomes. Compared with its eastern neighbours though, the former GDR did well. However, the costs of integrating the GDR into the new Germany were of such a nature that they probably worked as a deterrent for other divided nations to ever seek unification (estimated costs of German unification run at about 1.6 trillion Euro).¹ Unemployment is higher and income is lower in the east. However, in terms of unemployment the scales are slowly balancing. Currently, unemployment in eastern Germany sits at 6.1% while it is 4.6% in the west. That is significantly better than the 18.5 vs. 9.4 % rates in the late 1990s. The gap in income is related to the lack of availability of highly paid jobs in the mostly rural areas in the east but also due to the absence of saved fortune, which is less available in the east than it is in the west. In some areas, however, the east is also ahead of the west. Many more places at kindergartens are available in the former GDR, for instance, and vaccination rates are higher than in the west, too. Certainly, in terms of emancipation, the east was also ahead of the west with working women being a normality in the former GDR while the concept of the Hausfrau ('stay-at-home wife') was still widely spread in the west. Politically today though, parties such as the AfD and Die Linke (an offspring of the former ruling party in the GDR) see successes unmatched in the western part of the country. This points to remaining challenges and a perceived lack of perspectives, both economically but also in terms of infrastructure, provision of health and other public services as well as rural development. Politically, culturally and economically, too, East Germans are largely absent from the top positions. The obvious exception to this being Angela Merkel, an East German who had been chancellor of Germany since 2005, as well as former Federal President Joachim Gauck. Yet, some explanation for this divergence can also be derived from social patterns pre-dating the division of Germany with many parts of the east traditionally being more rural and less economically developed than western parts of Germany. In fact, the city-countryside divide seems to become more important in explaining many of the differences today (and will be so in the future) than the old divisions between west-east. Generational divisions seem to be another factor that explain discrepancies, independent from geographical location. So while there are certainly many domestic problems yet to be addressed, explaining them simply by the old leitmotif of the east being left behind does not go deep enough.

In terms of international politics, much has changed for Germany, too. Prior to the fall of the Wall, both Germanys were strongly integrated into their respective, and opposite, camps. Being economic and military pillars of their alliances, but without the biggest say in decision-making, they had arranged themselves in their cocoons of junior partners of their respective superpowers. Being a – technically – still occupied country explains that to some extent. Being comfortable not having to make such big decisions – and having to contribute to their implementation – also motivated this outcome. Both Germanys were comfortable in their niches of the stormy Cold War world. As a united country this changed, however. Catapulted back onto the European (and global) stage as the most populous and richest country in Europe with a strategically central position between east and west and a heavily export-oriented economy, Germany could no longer escape the maelstrom of global problems; although they tried at first. But with the conflict in Kosovo escalating in the late 1990s, and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Germany was called upon to form an opinion, and to contribute (also militarily) to international efforts. Military engagement aside, Germany was also expected to take a stronger lead in economic matters. With the financial crisis of the 2000s transforming into a Euro crisis, and by extension into a crisis of European integration, it was to Germany that European politicians looked for leadership. And despite temptations to look the other way for a while, in the end Germany had to take a proactive stance on these questions. The same applied to the unravelling crisis in Ukraine, and the ever-increasing numbers of refugees trying to get into Europe. Certainly today, Germany's influence seems to be bigger than 30 years ago, which is a sign both of the country's growing importance but also of the relative weakness of other key European players. Slowly but surely, Germany has stepped out of its Cold War corner and assumed a more centre-stage position on many issues, reluctantly but eventually. Many questions about the new orientation of German foreign policy will still have to be debated though and the costs associated with that (both financially but also in terms of body bags) are still a major deterrent. It remains to be seen how the new chancellor succeeding Angela Merkel by 2021 will steer this debate.

30 years on – an attempt at taking stock

Germany's unification has often been described as a Glücksfall for the country - a fortunate turn of events. And indeed, without the window of opportunity opening in late 1989, the rapid process towards reunification would not have been possible. But politics is as much about luck (or favourable conditions) as it is about the determination and leadership to seize those circumstances. In that sense, Chancellor Helmut Kohl – a previously rather ordinary politician without great hopes to win the chancellorship again – excelled. He



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drove the agenda and together with George Bush Sr directed the process towards the desired outcome. He also readily used the greatest asset West Germany had to offer – money – to secure unification. His other legacies aside, Kohl will always be remembered for the statesman-like fashion in which he conducted affairs in these fateful months of 1989 and 1990. Yet, other statesmen are owed praise too. Bush did not cave in to fears – prevalent in other western capitals – about a re-emergence of the ugly and aggressive Germany of the past. Instead he supported the process of unification. Gorbachev also shied away from using force to stop the protests in the East, and instead increased pressures upon the GDR gerontocracy to allow for change. But nothing of this would have been possible without the peaceful protests of the East Germans themselves. It was them that brought the Wall down, they peacefully rid themselves of their dictatorship and allowed for the tide changes of 1989/1990 to happen.

30 years on, Germany is a different place: united geographically and more equal domestically than it was 30 years ago. However, it is still a country that is somewhat trapped in the past and uncertain about the future. The east and west divide will continue to matter, certainly in terms of identity for the older generations, and as a convenient notion to exploit by politicians of various couleurs. But other questions will soon overshadow this. Ecological change and new protests around 'Fridays for Future' (equally attached to a specific weekday as the East German Monday demonstrations used to be) will become progressively more important and divisive topics. Managing the social welfare state around an aging population will present new challenges too and they will be associated with the divisions that have far pre-dated those of east and west: namely those between the cities and the rural regions, and amongst generations.

Unifying Germany was not an easy task and it was one for which no historical examples existed. Many things could have gone wrong and some did; this can be of little surprise. However, faced with this gigantic task, and 30 years into a future that has seen no major social, economic, and political upheavals, it seems that the Germans have managed this challenge rather well.

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¹ The Korean peninsula obviously comes to mind here. However, the situation here is much worse than the one between East and West Germany in 1989. North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world and the majority of the population so indoctrinated and shielded from the outside world that any attempt of unification would probably come at massive economic and social costs.