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The Fall of the GDR
Germany's Road to Unity

David Childs
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to intervene. On a yearly basis the November refugees represented a rate of loss for the GDR of a tenth of the population. East German society would soon collapse at this rate and West Germany would face great problems in attempting to deal with the sudden influx. The SED itself was bleeding to death, having been reduced from 2.3 million members before the crisis started in the summer to around 600,000. Kohl needed, with his speech, to give hope to ordinary East Germans. On 17 November demonstrators in Leipzig had dispensed with the GDR flag and displayed the simple black–red–gold tricolour, which was the flag of democratic Weimar Germany, the original GDR flag and the flag of the Federal Republic. They chanted, ‘Germany, united Fatherland’. The words were from the original GDR national anthem of 1949. Honecker had in effect banned the words of the anthem in the early 1970s. The demonstrators’ desires and sympathies could not have been clearer. At the same time, Kohl, with his speech, had to assuage the possible fears of Germany’s neighbours and ex-enemies. His Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, had been putting more emphasis on this than on the question of German unity. In an interview with the French newspaper Le Figaro (2 November 1989) shortly before the opening of the GDR’s frontiers, he had emphasised the issue of European rapprochement. He also went on record emphasising the right of the GDR’s citizens to determine their own place on the continent by freely expressing their own opinions in their own state. Genscher, himself a refugee from the GDR, rightly did not want to be seen as railroading the East Germans into unity. They had to be convinced they wanted it themselves.

Poland: ‘The wheel of history will not be turned back’

The neighbour that more than any other needed re-assurance was Poland. The older generations of Poles still remembered the horrors of the war, first the German and then, slightly later, the Soviet invasion, and the final ‘liberation’ by the Soviets in 1944. They remembered also the evils of the Nazi occupation. In their attempts to gain a modicum of popularity, successive Communist leaders, since 1945, had played on fears of German revanchism. Millions of Poles had been settled, some of them forcibly, in the former German areas of East Prussia and Silesia, from Danzig (Gdansk), Kolberg (Kolobrzeg), Stettin (Szczecin), Thorn (Torun), Wollin (Wolin) to Allenstein (Olsztyn), Breslau (Wroclaw) and Gleiwitz (Gliwice). Millions of Germans had fled or been expelled from these areas, and a German minority still lived there. After years of improvement following Chancellor Willy Brandt’s mission to Warsaw in 1970, relations between Poland and West Germany deteriorated in 1980–81. This was the result of the suppression of the free trade unions of Solidarity, led by Lech Wałęsa. German Foreign Minister Genscher’s visit to Warsaw in January 1988, and the Polish Prime Minister’s visit to Bonn in January 1989, marked a positive turning point. Speaking at the UN on 24 September 1989 Genscher attempted to re-assure the Polish people of their right to live with secure frontiers, which the Germans ‘now or in the future’ would not question.

GDR leader Krenz had also visited his Polish neighbours. On 2 November 1989, he met Communist President Jaruzelski, who attempted to re-assure him that Thatcher, Mitterrand and Italy’s Giulio Andreotti were against German re-unification. Krenz also met the non-Communist Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and other politicians. He left Warsaw with the impression that, whatever their ideological differences, the Poles saw the GDR as a bulwark against any revanchist endeavours from West Germany. No doubt there was truth in this feeling, but many Poles were also coming to the conclusion was the GDR was like a dyke which had been breached perhaps irreparably.

Kohl’s visit to Poland on 9 and 14 November 1989 saw the conclusion of 11 agreements and a joint communiqué on the ‘firm foundation’ of the 1970 Warsaw Treaty. These were based on the underlying policy of continuing German economic help, civilised treatment for the German minority in Poland (which had been deprived of its cultural freedom) and recognition of the Polish–German frontier. This visit was cut short by events in the GDR, which caused Kohl to take flight to Berlin. By this time the Communist era was virtually at an end in Poland. Party boss General Wojciech Jaruzelski had initiated Round Table Talks with Solidarity and the Catholic Church in 1988 which had led to elections in the summer of 1989. As a result of these elections, Mazowiecki became Prime Minister. In November 1989 Jaruzelski was still presiding over the state. The German Bundestag sought to give Poland re-assurance by its resolution of 8 November 1989 when it declared, ‘The wheel of history will not be turned back. We want to work with Poland for a better Europe. The inviolability of frontiers is the basis for peaceful living together in Europe.’ Nevertheless, the Poles felt aggrieved that in his ten-point plan of 28 November Kohl had found no space to mention the frontier issue. This was, of course, not an accident.

Washington: ‘Profoundly uneasy with the idea’

Early in 1989, Professor George Kennan, former Director of the US State Department’s Policy Planning Staff and former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, set down his thoughts on the German problem for the prestigious American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, DC. Of the East Germans he wrote,
It would be an exaggeration to say that 40 years of separation from the rest of Germany and subjection to the discipline of a Leninist-communist regime have created in the people of East Germany a new sense of nationality. They remain Germans. Nonetheless, these long years of separation unquestionably have affected them in many ways—in their habits, their outlooks, and their tastes and preferences. In certain respects, to be sure, they envy their West German cousins the conditions in which the latter live; but there are other aspects of West German life that they would not find entirely congenial and where they would prefer to preserve habits, outlooks, and, in some instances, even institutions to which they have grown accustomed. . . . German unification would not be as simple today as it might have been four decades ago.

He did not believe that the demand for unification within Germany was so great as many Western commentators assumed. Its achievement could not be ‘a serious immediate aim of West German or NATO policy’. He expected relations between the two German states to improve via ‘a long series of practical measures’. As for Berlin and its Wall, he could conceive of its dismantlement in the not-too-distant future without serious consequences for the East German side provided the West did not use this event to humiliate the East German authorities. The only hopeful resolution of the Berlin problem was by ‘eventual Europeanization of the city’. Kennan’s view was that of a well-informed, enlightened intellectual and diplomat who regarded himself as a realist and was so regarded. Some of his former State Department colleagues thought that his essay was a sensible summing up. Others probably thought he was being a little bit too optimistic. During the months that followed State Department officials were forced to conclude that Kennan had been too cautious and pessimistic. In August 1989, writing in Bonn, Ann Philips, a Ford Foundation Fellow, who had interviewed many in the SED, SPD and American experts, believed, ‘Reunification of the two Germanies “on FRG soil” is not possible and reunification of the two states is not desired. This may prove to be an invaluable, if ironic, trump for the SED. . . . Washington is no more favourably disposed . . . than the Soviet Union, Poland, France, or Great Britain.’

There had been vague talk about German re-unification in Washington before October 1989. By October, however, as The Wall Street Journal reported (8 October 1989), State Department officials saw Germany’s future as an issue demanding more attention. They apparently thought that German re-unification would not ‘happen tomorrow’, but ‘we may have to respond sooner than we thought’. The United States remained formally pledged to support German re-unification, as long as it occurred democratically. ‘But U.S. officials actually are profoundly uneasy with the idea. Only a few weeks ago. . . . Secretary of State James Baker was ducking the issue.’ He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he preferred to speak of it in terms of normalisation of relations between the two Germanys on the basis of Western values. In other words, even in a Europe where ‘Western values’ prevail, there would be two Germanys. Federal German President Richard von Weizsäcker attempted to reassure Americans by saying that Germany would stay on the solid ground of the NATO alliance and European Community ‘to strengthen those partnerships which we have been lucky enough to find after a more-than-terrible past’. The Wall Street Journal commented that the arguments had fallen on ‘friendly but sceptical ears’. American officials believed that the EC was still largely an economic organisation, years or even decades away from holding the kind of power that could curb nationalist sentiments in its largest member. Moreover, West Germany was already the dominant power in the EC. The paper concluded that the ‘German question’ was ‘a hot potato nobody wants to handle but which will be increasingly hard to avoid’.

This was the situation when Kohl’s ten-point bombshell exploded. Although President Bush and his colleagues had not been notified beforehand of Kohl’s initiative, they soon concluded they did not want to do anything to harm Kohl. They regarded the Chancellor as their most reliable ally in Bonn. Accordingly, a day after Kohl’s speech, Secretary of State James Baker gave a press conference at which he dealt with Kohl’s initiative. He laid down four principles concerning German re-unification. Firstly, self-determination had to be realised without pre-determining the end result. That meant that the parties involved should not bind themselves to a specific form of unity and exclude other perspectives. Unity could mean many things—it could mean a single federal state, it could mean a confederation, or it could mean something else. The second principle was that unity should be within the context of continuing German membership of NATO and growing European integration. Thirdly, unity should be achieved by a peaceful, gradual and step-by-step process. Finally, it should be based on the Helsinki Final Act regarding frontiers in Europe. President George Bush reiterated these conditions in his speech to the NATO council on 4 December.

Mitterrand: ‘I am not afraid of German re-unification’

For the French, events in the GDR and Eastern Europe came at an inopportune moment. They were engaged in the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution of 1789. For three days, 13–16 July, Paris had been transformed into the diplomatic capital of the world, when the celebrations were combined with the G7 meeting of the leaders of the world’s top industrial nations, and Mitterrand held forth on human rights. From August on, however, world attention shifted from Paris to East Europe. Since the Franco-West German Treaty of 1963 there had been close co-operation
Rohwedder was assassinated by RAF terrorists on 1 April 1991 before his mission was completed. Among the highlights of the trust’s activities, in 1991, were the closing down of the GDR national radio and television stations, the end of the production of the Trabant car on 30 April, and at the end of July, the handing over of the GDR lottery to Berlin and the five Länders. The West German company with the same name bought 51 per cent of the shares in Carl-Zeiss Jena, the world famous optics firm. The rest were held by the Carl-Zeiss Foundation, administered by the government of Thuringia. In 1992 the famous DEFA studios were sold to a firm controlled by the French CGE. By March 1992, 20 per cent of the firms privatized had been sold in management buyouts, but these were mainly the smaller businesses. The GDR shipbuilding industry presented a particular problem in that 80 per cent of its orders were from Soviet customers who could not pay for the vessels ordered. Eventually the yards were sold to a Norwegian firm, Kvaerner, and the Bremen firm Vulkan. Heavy subsidies were involved. What became later one of the most controversial decisions was the sale of Leuna/Minol to a consortium of the German Thyssen and the French state oil enterprise Elf.

The trust faced criticism from abroad for allegedly favouring West German firms. Of course German firms had many natural advantages over foreign competitors of language, geography and local knowledge. Nearer home it was attacked for incompetence, cronyism and corruption. Certainly there were a number cases where property speculators managed to get their hands on properties at knockdown prices. It was only in August 1991 that the executive of the trust passed rules governing insider trading by those working for the Treuhand. Another problem was analysing just how much GDR businesses were worth. Outside assessors were needed who had knowledge of particular industrial sectors and they were likely to be drawn from competitors and potential buyers. Some West German trade union leaders were also appointed to the board of the trust. By January 1992, the number of employees working for firms controlled by the trust had fallen from 4,080,000 in 1990 to 1,650,000. What had happened to the rest? Unemployment was the fate of 336,000, 455,000 had retired or were on government-financed work creation programmes (ABM), and about 640,000 had changed their jobs or professions. Ownership disputes, poor infrastructure, environmental problems, poor image and lack of Western life-style facilities hampered efforts to attract outside, especially non-German, investors. East Germans found themselves competing against low-paid but skilled Czechs and Poles, and highly paid but highly productive West Germans.

On 15 June 1990, agreement was reached on the ownership of GDR property, including land, which had been confiscated, since the setting up of the GDR in 1949, from GDR citizens who had gone West illegally. Basically, this was to be restored to them. This was a difficult and emotional problem. In the main, those affected were people with a family home or smallholding which they had forfeited by ‘deserting’ the GDR. In many cases their property had been handed over to loyal SED members who had lived in the properties for as long as thirty or forty years. In some cases they were faced with West Germans knocking on their doors demanding to be let in. Property seized before the setting up of the GDR did not come within the scope of the settlement.

As the economic situation deteriorated, protests and strikes followed. On 5–6 July there were strikes in the metal and engineering industries. These were settled on 13 July with pay increases of 20 per cent, a 40-hour week and a 12-month job-security guarantee. Strikes by chemical workers got them a 35 per cent pay increase and a promise of payment for a ‘13th month’ in the year. Rail workers also took strike action, which led to pay increases. In August it was the turn of public service employees, including public transport, to take part in warning strikes. Controversy continued long after about the increases in pay. Some, both trade unionists and employers, believed they speeded up the rise in unemployment. Farmers were among the hardest hit by the new economic situation of outside competition. Their industry had been heavily subsidised, productivity was low and there was chronic overmanning. In the new situation they could not compete with agricultural products from West Germany and other EC countries. On 15 August 250,000 farmers took part in demonstrations and erected blockades in the streets. Although they got DM 1,650 million in emergency aid, their situation remained precarious. Many of them failed over the following years.

In May 1990 a special fund was announced by Kohl’s government, the ‘Fund for German Unity’. The Federal government and the Länder were prepared to guarantee 115 bn marks over five years as a down payment towards the rehabilitation of the German economy. So much needed to be done to bring the roads, railways, airports, streets and housing up to modern standards. The devastation wrought by the Soviet armed forces to large tracts of land over the previous forty years was not yet clear.

**Two Plus Four**

The Treaty on Monetary, Economic and Social Union committed the two German states to national unity in accordance with article 23 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany ‘as a contribution to European unification, taking into account that the external aspects of establishing unity are the subject of negotiations with the Governments of the French Republic, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of...
Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America. The Germans recognised that unity could only be achieved by agreement between Moscow, Bonn and the three Western Powers. A number of consultations on the basis of 'Two Plus Four', meaning the foreign ministers of the four victor powers of 1945 and the foreign ministers of the two German states, were already underway by the time the Treaty on Monetary, Economic and Social Union was signed.

For Kohl and his Foreign Minister Genscher, a breakthrough came on their visit to Moscow on 10–11 February 1990. By then they had 'good relations with Gorbachev. Undoubtedly Gorbachev's visit to West Germany in June 1989 had made a great impression on the Soviet leader. Der Spiegel (5 June 1989) reported poll findings which revealed that 73 per cent of West Germans had a positive attitude to the Soviet Union. This compared with only 13 per cent in 1983. It also published a poll showing that Gorbachev was much more popular in West Germany than Bush, Mitterrand or Thatcher. Scenes of almost hysterical enthusiasm confronted the Soviet leader, the kind of reception he did not experience at home. He needed German help and the Germans were ready to oblige. He was clear that the SED regime was dead. In February 1990 Gorbachev agreed on the principle of German unity, leaving it to the Germans themselves to decide the timing and method. The Germans assured him on the question of frontiers, economic aid and other matters but insisted on Germany remaining in NATO. Gorbachev later summed up the situation at that time as follows, 'We had managed to clear up the misunderstandings, which was most important at that particular stage. However, there was still a long and dangerous road before us.'

On 14 February the foreign ministers of the four allies and the two German states agreed to begin formal talks on the process to achieve German unity. Later that month, 24–5 February, Kohl and Bush met at Camp David and agreed on German unity. Germany was to remain in NATO, and the USA would continue to act as guarantor of stability in Europe. Kohl was the first German Chancellor to be honoured by a visit to Camp David. The leaders of both superpowers were courting Kohl! Such treatment could only help his political friends in the East German elections.

The first meeting of the Two Plus Four talks was held in Bonn, involving East and West German officials and representatives of the four powers on 14 March four days before the GDR elections. This was followed by a meeting of the foreign ministers in Bonn on 5 May at which the security implications of German unity were discussed. James Baker, US Secretary of State, took the opportunity to underline that the USA regarded the existing frontiers as unassailable and that a united Germany would comprise the Federal Republic, the GDR and Berlin, 'not more and not less'. Baker put the emphasis in his contribution on the ending of all the residual rights of the four wartime allies. The united Germany would be fully sovereign. The following month, on 7 June, the Warsaw Pact meeting in Moscow announced that it was giving up its old, ideological, hostile view of the West and that in future the terms 'East' and 'West' should be, once again, merely geographical terms. On Germany, the Pact members stressed that German unity in its external aspects should be on the basis of satisfying the legitimate security interests of Germany's neighbours and the recognition of the inviolability of frontiers in Europe. The next day NATO welcomed the Warsaw Pact's declaration and also went on record that German unity would be a considerable contribution to stability in Europe. The documents seem to reveal that everything was going ahead smoothly, but there were still doubters in many quarters and it needed little to bring them out.

The Oder–Neisse Line

After the visit to Camp David, on 25 February, Kohl caused a furore by appearing to hesitate on the frontier issue. At a press conference, he pulled back from stating clearly that the Oder–Neisse frontier was the final frontier between the two countries, Germany and Poland. He argued that this was a matter for a freely elected government and freely elected parliament of a united Germany. He also said that nobody would link the question of unity of the nation with a change in existing frontiers. On the same occasion Bush emphasised that the United States recognised the inviolability of the existing frontiers in Europe and formally recognised the existing German–Polish frontier. Another interesting aspect of the press conference was the emphasis the two leaders put on the European Community as an anchor of European stability. They therefore wanted European integration to be speeded up. Their aim, they said, was political union via the single market and currency union. It was Kohl's remarks about the frontier, however, which caused a storm. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, made it clear that she would only support German unification if Germany recognised the Oder–Neisse Line. Kohl's European Community colleagues took the same position. As we saw in Chapter 8, Margaret Thatcher did little to hide her unease at the prospect of German reunification. She dwelt on the past. In an interview with The Sunday Times (25 February 1990) she commented, 'You cannot just ignore the history of this century as if it did not happen, and say, "We are going to unify and everything else will have to be worked out afterwards." That is not the way.'

The result of such apparent equivocation by Kohl was that by February 1990 well over half the population of Poland feared the consequences of the restoration of German unity. The Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz
Mazowiecki, stated that all such ambiguous statements on the issue had convinced the Poles that they were correct in demanding that the border be confirmed before Germany’s re-unification. A remarkable event which worried some Poles was the success of ethnic Germans living in Upper Silesia in recent local elections. For the first time, they had been allowed to stand. The greatest success was in Turawa, where Germans won all 21 council seats. Most people outside Poland had no idea that there was still a significant German minority living there. In Britain, Thatcher and her government agreed with the Poles on the frontier issue. Indeed, Kohl’s prevarication on the Oder–Neisse issue was greeted with anger and incomprehension in Britain, France and elsewhere. Why had Kohl wavered on the frontier issue taking up such a legalistic position? Firstly, because of course what he said was the exact legal position. He could not presume that the GDR electors would vote for parties which would opt for joining the Federal Republic. Nor could he speak for the GDR. Undoubtedly, he that the GDR electors would vote for parties which would opt for joining the Federal Republic. Could he not presume that the GDR electors would vote for parties which would opt for joining the Federal Republic? He could not assume that the GDR electors would vote for parties which would opt for joining the Federal Republic. Indeed, Kohl’s prevarication on the Oder–Neisse issue was greeted with anger and incomprehension in Britain, France and elsewhere. Why had Kohl wavered on the frontier issue taking up such a legalistic position? Firstly, because of course what he said was the exact legal position. He could not presume that the GDR electors would vote for parties which would opt for joining the Federal Republic. Nor could he speak for the GDR. Undoubtedly, he was hoping to strengthen the CDU’s support in the coming March elections in the GDR, and his party’s support in the regional elections in Lower Saxony and Northrhine-Westphalia in May, mentioned above. In both parts of Germany there were millions who had lost their homes, or whose parents had lost their homes, in the territories beyond the Oder–Neisse Line. Most did not believe they would ever get them back, but they wanted an occasional recognition that they too had suffered. Kohl’s wavering was a hint that he understood, that his heart was in the right place. Kohl also had in his mind the relative success of the far right Republicans in earlier recent elections, although he must have known that the achievement of German unity would seriously undermine their credibility.

Kohl’s remarks about the German–Polish frontier caused headaches for Bush, who had to carry on much behind-the-scenes diplomacy. At home he had to contend with the worries of Polish-Americans and Jewish-Americans. Arthur Miller, one of America’s best-known writers and of Jewish origin, contributed to the debate with an article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine on 6 May 1990. He had good things to say about West German progress since 1945, but worried because the Germans had not fought for democracy themselves. It was a system imposed by the Allies.

Does the Federal Republic of Germany arouse lofty democratic feelings in its citizens’ minds, or is it simply a matter of historical convenience invented by foreigners? To be sure, this system has helped the nation to prosper as never before, but the issue is how deep the commitment is to its democratic precepts, how sacred are they, and if they will hold in hard times.

Earlier in the year, Yitzhak Shamir, the Israeli Prime Minister, had expressed his views on Germany. In a statement he said that even forty years of democracy were not yet a guarantee against a repetition of the past. To demonstrate their goodwill, the speakers of the Bundestag and the Volkskammer, Professor Rita Süssmuth and Dr Sabine Bergmann-Pohl, paid a joint visit to Israel. The women gave Israelis a totally different image of Germany from the usual stereotype and undoubtedly helped to create a better climate of opinion in Israel towards the new Germany, which was by then only weeks away. It was the only such joint initiative.

The terrible suffering inflicted on the Polish people

On 21 June 1990 the Bundestag and the Volkskammer in identical resolutions overwhelmingly voted to approve the Oder–Neisse Line as the final frontier between Germany and Poland. In the 400-strong Volkskammer only 6 members opposed the resolution and 18 abstained. In the 519-strong Bundestag 487 members voted in favour and 15 against, including Dr Herbert Czaja, chairman of the organisation representing the expellees and refugees. The resolution of the two parliaments stated that the Bundestag (and Volkskammer) was

anxious to make a contribution through German unity to the development of a peaceful order in Europe in which frontiers no longer divide, which enables all European nations to live together in mutual trust and engage in comprehensive co-operation for the common benefit, and which ensures lasting peace, freedom and stability.

The Bundestag expressed consciousness of the terrible suffering inflicted on the Polish people through crimes perpetrated by Germans and in the name of Germany. But it also expressed consciousness of the great injustice done to millions of Germans who have been expelled from their native regions. The Oder–Neisse Line had been originally accepted by the GDR in 1950, but not by West Germany. The resolution ‘expressed its will’ that the course of the frontier between the united Germany and Poland ‘be definitely confirmed by a treaty under international law’. It accepted it as that defined in the treaty of 6 July 1950 between the GDR and Poland, the treaty between the two states of 22 May 1989, and the treaty between the Federal Republic and Poland ‘concerning the basis for Normalising their Mutual Relations’ of 7 December 1970. Brandt’s SPD–FDP government had been responsible for the 1970 treaty. The resolutions also underlined that the ‘the two sides [Germany and Poland] have no territorial claims whatsoever against each other and that they will not assert such claims in the future’. The resolutions of the two parliaments changed nothing but helped to assuage Polish and other people’s fears about where Germany was heading.
On the following day, 22 June, a second round of the Two Plus Four talks at ministerial level was held in East Berlin. On the agenda were the defence aspects of a united Germany. Eduard Schevardnadze, Soviet Foreign Minister, started by reminding his colleagues that their meeting was taking place on the 49th anniversary of the ‘treacherous attack by fascist troops’ on the Soviet Union. He believed that, as in the past, the situation in Germany was but a mirror image of the broader situation in Europe. He was optimistic about the progress being made. The frontier question would be resolved by reference to the Gorki treaty of 1950 between the GDR and Poland and the 1970 Warsaw Treaty between the Federal Republic and Poland. He expected a united Germany to relinquish, like the majority of states, the right to manufacture, own, maintain or station nuclear weapons on its territory. He proposed a transitional period during which the four powers would reduce their forces in the GDR and the Federal Republic by 50 per cent and later withdraw them from Germany altogether. He also proposed that within six months of a government of a united Germany being established the four powers should withdraw their forces from Greater Berlin. For a period of five years, the Soviet Foreign Minister continued, treaties entered into by the GDR and the Federal Republic would continue to be valid. This would mean that neither NATO nor the Warsaw Pact forces would move forward from their existing areas of operations in Germany.

Meanwhile, time was running out for the GDR’s old diplomatic elite. There was an air of uncertainty, defeat and despondency in GDR embassies around the globe. Most of those deployed knew that they had little chance of remaining in the service after unification. In many cases the issue was simply, ‘Will I get a pension?’ One of the last engagements of the GDR’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Joachim Mitdank, was to open an exhibition at Nottingham University on the GDR’s first, and last, free elections of March 1990. This was his first, and last, visit to the East Midlands university. He was, in effect, opening an exhibition revealing how his political friends were defeated. A loyal SED member, Mitdank had been in the GDR’s diplomatic service since 1956 and had had two tours of duty in Finland. Between 1968 and 1978 he was head of the department responsible for relations with West Berlin, ensuring that the GDR got the best deal when it allowed West Berliners visas to visit their relations in the East. Mitdank was replaced a few weeks before unification by a young woman pastor.

‘This rushed take-over by the Germans’

In July 1990 a memorandum was leaked to the British paper The Independent on Sunday and to Der Spiegel which claimed to be the results of the deliberations of six historians, two American and four British, on Germany. They had been asked by Mrs Thatcher to let her have their thoughts on the Germans at a seminar at Chequers in March. Although what was allegedly said was by no means all negative, nor was it very flattering to the Germans. The leaked memo did nothing to improve the international atmosphere as the date set for German unity approached. A modest counterblast was fired by the Director of the influential American Institute for Contemporary German Affairs, in Washington, DC, and the Director of the Institute of German, Austrian and Swiss Affairs of Nottingham University. They felt convinced that the majority of British and American social scientists, historians and other specialists on German affairs did not share the views expressed in the leaked memorandum.

However, worse was to come. Nicholas Ridley, Trade and Industry Minister in Thatcher’s government and a close associate of the Prime Minister, was prepared to articulate fears she could not. In an infamous interview with the weekly Spectator (14 July 1990) he claimed that European Monetary Union was a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe. ‘This rushed take-over by the Germans on the worst possible basis, with the French behaving like poodles to the Germans, is absolutely intolerable. . . .’ Although papers like the Sun and The Daily Express claimed their readers overwhelmingly supported Ridley in his anti-German outburst, the surprising thing for some was that many Conservative MPs, and very many ordinary voters, disagreed with him. According to The Independent (13 July 1990), polls revealed that 64 per cent of British people approved of German unification and 71 per cent were in favour of attempts to unify Western Europe. Sixty per cent also had either a lot of trust or some trust in West Germans. Only 29 per cent thought a united Germany posed a threat to European peace, and most of them were the older generation who had memories of the war. Thatcher was forced to remove Ridley from her government. The Ridley incident and the leaked memo looked, in retrospect, as sad rearguard actions by British opponents of German unity.

For Kohl the final triumph came in July 1990 when he visited Gorbachev in the Caucasus. Gorbachev and Kohl had a number of one-to-one meetings, as well as talks with their foreign ministers. At these meetings the two leaders agreed that a united Germany could belong to NATO. Kohl and Gorbachev also agreed on the strength of the German armed forces with a maximum strength of 370,000 men for the united Germany. This represented a cut. They also agreed that the Soviet forces in Germany would be withdrawn over a four-year period. Germany, it was agreed, would enjoy full and unrestricted sovereignty but would renounce forever the possession of nuclear, chemical and bacteriological weapons. Kohl gave the Soviet leader various undertakings to cover the costs of the Soviet withdrawal from Germany as
the Soviet state was in no position to house its returning troops. Gorbachev records that he told Kohl, 'We cannot forget the past. Every family in our country suffered in those years. But we have to look towards Europe and take the road of co-operation with the great German nation.'

**The grand coalition collapses**

De Maizière's coalition fell apart in the summer of 1990 because of differences over the electoral system and ministerial portfolios. The CDU, and the West German Christian Democrats, the DSU and the FDS favoured retention of the existing electoral law for the elections due in December 1990. The Social Democrats and FDP in both parts of Germany wanted the existing West German electoral system used throughout Germany. In protest the FDP withdrew from the coalition on 24 July. De Maizière requested the two FDP members of the coalition to continue at their posts. Negotiations on unification also led to disagreements between the CDU and the SPD. The SPD parliamentary group in the Volkskammer voted on 7 August to remain in the government, but reversed this decision on 19–20 August after the Minister-President had made changes in the government against the SPD's wishes. Walter Romberg lost his post for allegedly mismanaging state funds since the introduction of monetary union and failing to give leadership in his ministry. Also dismissed was the SPD-backed independent Peter Pollack. Gerhard Pohl and Kurt Wünsche resigned. Against the advice of Richard Schröder, its Chairman, the SPD Volkskammer group voted, on 19 August, by 60 votes to 5, to leave the coalition. The following day the remaining SPD ministers resigned from the coalition. De Maizière decided to take over the Foreign Ministry himself and gave Jürgen Kleditzsch the additional responsibility for Labour and Social Affairs. Hans-Joachim Meyer added Research and Technology to his responsibilities. Lothar Engel was put in charge of Trade and Tourism and Gottfried Haschke took on Food, Agriculture and Forestry. Richard Schröder was probably right that withdrawing from the coalition at this stage was not the best policy for the SPD. It meant that the Christian Democrats alone would lead the GDR into unity with West Germany. Fears that the break-up could delay unification were also voiced, as the Unity Treaty would require a two-thirds majority, which de Maizière did not have.

Separately from the other resignations, Axel Viehweger resigned because of accusations that he worked for the Stasi, which he denied. In fact, a list of 68 members of the Volkskammer who were suspected of Stasi activities was presented on 15–16 September 1990 by the parliamentary committee responsible. The Volkskammer appointed Pastor Joachim Gauck, himself a Stasi target, as commissioner responsible for the Stasi files. A member of

**The GDR leaves the Warsaw Pact**

Rainer Eppelmann's most important formal engagement as Minister for Disarmament and Defence was to sign the documents taking the GDR out of the Warsaw Pact. This happened in September 1990. It was an incredible story which neither he nor anyone else could have imagined even a year before. This hardly known, humble clergyman from Berlin, who had been the object of so much Stasi attention, who had been imprisoned for eight months for refusing to serve in the NVA, here he was, the successor to Admiral Theodor Hoffmann.

Eppelmann's job had not been easy, even though by the time he took over everyone expected re-unification to take place. There was the problem of keeping the higher echelons of the NVA happy so that they did not attempt to take matters into their own hands. After all, for them collectively, they were to surrender the machine they had built up. Individually, they did not seem to have a future. It looked like the disbanding of the NVA was not far off – or was it? Admiral Hoffmann, no longer a minister, was, however, still the highest serving officer. This was surprising given his membership of the SED and total loyalty to it. On the other hand, he had not advanced up the party ladder and the navy appeared to be the least politicised branch of the NVA. Eppelmann had to get the best professional advice available to keep the NVA out of politics and maintain discipline within the ranks. He had to confront the possibility that the ordinary servicemen, conscripts and professionals alike, would simply stop obeying orders. There had been a mutiny of conscripts in January 1990 at the Beelitz base, south-west of Berlin. In March 1990, in Berlin, soldiers of the élite guards regiment Friedrich Engels demonstrated in protest about their poor living conditions and against having to take part in goose-stepping ceremonial duties on the Unter den Linden. Discipline was weakening as many young men could not see the point of military training in an army which was discredited, doomed and without raison d'être. Conscripts were deserting or simply not returning from leave.

Eppelmann did his best to keep matters under control. Various talks took place, starting with a meeting between Eppelmann and his opposite number in Bonn, Dr Gerhard Stoltenberg, on 27 April. It is significant that the meeting took place in the Holiday Inn Hotel at Cologne–Bonn Airport rather than at the Federal Ministry of Defence. After talks with
Eppelmann and Hoffmann at Strausberg, headquarters of the GDR defence ministry, on 28 May, the West German side was worried that there had been no 'house-cleaning' in the NVA of hard-line senior SED officers. Hoffmann and Eppelmann seemed to believe that the Warsaw Pact would continue to exist and that the NVA would have a bridging function between East and West. The officer corps of the NVA believed that it had a secure future. Indeed, earlier, on 2 May, Eppelmann told the first conference of NVA commanding officers to be held under his command that although German unity was the aim, after it was achieved there would still be a second German army in the former GDR. This would be an army which was not part of any alliance but would have as its function the security of the former GDR. The continued existence of the NVA (or something similar) seemed to be emphasised on 20 July 1990, the anniversary of the 1944 officers' bomb plot against Hitler, when NVA troops were required to take a new oath of allegiance to the now democratic GDR. Eppelmann thanked the officers of the NVA for preventing a 'Chinese situation'. Five days earlier, Gorbachev and Kohl had agreed on the size of the German armed forces and the Soviet withdrawal from Germany. On 10 August the two ministers, Eppelmann and Stoltenberg, met again and agreed to send a civilian and military liaison group from Bonn to Strausberg, to gather information for planning the armed forces of the united Germany. In secret, on 14 August, Stoltenberg appointed General Jorg Schönbohm of the Bundeswehr as commander-designate of Bundeswehr-Kommando Ost, as the former GDR territory was to be known in Bonn's defence ministry. He would take over the units of the former NVA immediately on unification of the two states. His task was mainly one of disbanding the NVA, securing all stores and building up Bundeswehr forces there. Apparently, the GDR officials and officers responsible were still not clear that the NVA would cease to exist.

As unity drew closer, Eppelmann came under increasing pressure. He embarked on a partial demobilisation of the NVA. It was reduced from 175,000 to 103,000. The military intelligence service, the military prosecutors and the propaganda units were disbanded. A few days before the 3 October unity deadline, he instructed his permanent secretary, Werner Ablass, to retire the generals and admirals and all officers over 55 and all members of the Political Main Administration, the SED's political officers within the NVA. Admiral Hoffmann was retired on 15 September from a force he had joined in 1952 when it was still officially a police unit. Schönbohm arrived at Strausberg on 2 October to find that the troops there were still wearing their old uniforms. At midnight, at a small reception, he took over. The guards he had met earlier were now kitted out in Bundeswehr uniforms. The NVA had ceased to exist. It had cost the people of the GDR an awful lot, which could have contributed to their living standards. Perhaps there was a minority that took pride in its ceremonial events. But many more, especially foreign visitors, were put off a state that put so much emphasis on archaic military rituals, which reminded them of an earlier even uglier time. 'Unlike the Bundeswehr, it was a force built on "unconditional obedience" ('unbedingte Gehorsamkeit'), as its training manuals emphasised, and hatred of Bundeswehr troops 'who would be ready to commit any crime, like their US models'. The NVA had only been on active service once and that was to take part in the invasion of a friendly neighbour. In the end 6,000 officers and 11,000 NCOs of the NVA were taken into the Bundeswehr on a trial basis for two years. Of these, about 3,000 officers and 7,600 NCOs were given the opportunity for longer service. Of the navy's 8,500 personnel, 7,000 were dismissed. Most of their ships were sold abroad or scrapped. It is not surprising that when General Schönbohm visited the fleet on 11 October he found a 'depressed atmosphere among the men'. Schönbohm's task did not end on 3 October; his job of disbanding the NVA, disposing of its equipment and integrating elements of it into the Bundeswehr went on throughout 1991.

The Volkskammer and the Bundestag vote for unity
On 12 September 1990, the representatives of the two German states and the four Allies signed the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany. The signing of the ten-article treaty took place in Moscow. In the case of the GDR, de Maiziere acted as Foreign Minister. Under article 6, Germany had the right 'to belong to alliances, with all the rights and responsibilities arising therefrom'. The four powers agreed in article 7 to 'terminate their rights and responsibilities relating to Berlin and to Germany as a whole'. Germany 'shall have accordingly full sovereignty over its internal and external affairs'. Article 4 laid down that Soviet troops would withdraw from Germany by the end of 1994. Until this time no NATO troops, including those of the Bundeswehr assigned to NATO, would be stationed in the former GDR. Article 1 was of particular importance for Poland and the Czech Republic. 'The united Germany and the Republic of Poland shall confirm the existing border between them in a treaty that is binding under international law.' Germany renounced all territorial claims 'now and in the future'. The Germans also undertook to amend articles 23 and 146 of the Basic Law accordingly. Article 23 covered the area of jurisdiction of the Basic Law, which, after naming the Western Länder, laid down, 'It is to be put in operation in other parts of Germany after their admission' ('In anderen Teilen Deutschlands ist es nachderen Beitritt in Kraft zu setzen'). The GDR had chosen this route. Remote though this was,
there was the nagging fear that a former German part of Poland or even the
Kaliningrad (Königsberg) area of the Soviet Union might apply. Article 146
of the Basic Law laid down that it would lose its validity on the day that a
constitution was inaugurated which had been agreed by the free decision of
the German people. One other important aspect of the Treaty was that, in
article 2, the Germans re-affirmed their renunciation of the manufacture
and possession of and control over nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

The Volkskammer voted on 23 August, with nearly three-quarters of the
members in favour, for the entry of the GDR to the area of jurisdiction of
the Basic Law (the West German constitution) according to its article 23.
The Unity Treaty between the two states was signed on 21 August. The
Treaty was then ratified by the two parliaments on 20 September with
the PDS, Bündnis 90 and the Greens voting against. In the Bundestag, the
vote was 442 in favour and 47 against with 3 abstentions. The anti-votes
were the Greens and 13 Christian Democrats. The Bundesrat, the Länderehamber of the German parliament, agreed the treaty on the following
day. Richard von Weizsäcker, the Federal President, signed the treaty on
29 September, thus completing the legislation on unity. On that day thou-
sands marched from West to East Berlin to protest against the terms of
the treaty. The votes in the two parliaments, however, had revealed that these
demonstrators were not representative of German opinion.

'The war is finally over'
The GDR CDU merged with the West German CDU on 1 October 1990 at
a congress in Hamburg. Kohl was elected Chair by 98.5 per cent of the vote
and de Maizière Deputy Chair by 97.4 per cent. Volker Rühe was returned
as General Secretary. The enlarged ten-member presidium included three
members from the GDR. The Social Democrats of East and West had merged
already on 27–8 September. They re-elected Hans-Jochen Vogel as their
Chair, Lafontaine as their Chancellor candidate and the East German
Wolfgang Thierse as Deputy Chair.

On 2 October the Allied Kommandatura met for the last time in Dahlem,
West Berlin, where it had been quartered since 1945. On the same day the
city councils of the two parts of Berlin declared the end of the division of
the city.

On the night of 2–3 October official celebrations took place in front
of the Reichstag and, a few yards away, at the Brandenburg Gate. The
music of Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn filled the air. There was
the inevitable firework display and the singing of the national anthem. The
Guardian correspondent David Gow wrote that 'Germany, an economic and
political colossus in the heart of Europe, was reborn today on the stroke of
midnight... More than a million people witnessed the historic end of
two separate German states' (3 October 1990). There were much smaller
counter-demonstrations against unification in a few places. In Berlin, several
thousand protested their opposition. These were from several far left groups,
including the anarchist fringe from West Berlin. On that night, President
Bush said in a televised address, 'The last remnants of the wall remain,
there at the heart of a free Berlin - a ragged monument in brick and barbed
wire - proof that no wall is ever strong enough to strangle the human spirit,
that no wall can ever crush a nation's soul.' De Maizière recalled Ger-
many's murderous past, including the Holocaust, and urged all Germans to
regard it as a permanent spur to serve reconciliation and contribute to
understanding among the peoples of the earth. He called the end of the
GDR 'a farewell without tears.' Czech President Václav Havel commented,
'The war is finally over.'

The Bundestag had been enlarged from 519 to 663 members to include
144 representatives of the former GDR nominated by the Volkskammer. They
included 63 CDU, 8 DSU, 9 FDP, 33 SPD, 7 Bündnis 90/Greens and
24 PDS. The first session of the enlarged parliament was held in the old
Reichstag building in Berlin on 4 October. Five members of the outgoing
GDR government were sworn in as members without portfolios. They were
de Maizière, Bergmann-Pohl, Günther Krause, all CDU, and Hansjoachim
Walther (DSU) and Rainer Ortleb (FDP). This was a transitional solution
until the federal elections of December 1990. One of the first acts of the new
Bundestag was to ratify the Treaty on the Final Settlement on 5 October.
The Bundesrat ratified it on 8 October.

Further victories for Kohl
In the elections for the parliaments of the five restored Länder – New
Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and
Thuringia – on an average turnout of 68.77 per cent, the CDU won enough
votes to form governments in all but New Brandenburg, where Manfred
Stolpe formed a coalition with the FDP. In Saxony, Professor Kurt
Biedenkopf, General Secretary of the West German CDU, 1973–77, formed
a CDU-only government (see Table 11.12).

As the federal elections approached, Lafontaine saw the lead he had held
at the beginning of the year disappear totally. The SPD was fighting to limit
the damage as far as possible. The smaller opposition parties were strug-
gling to get enough votes to gain re-entry into the Bundestag. Kohl's victory
proved to be greater than expected. Turnout was down, only 78.6 per cent
in the West, compared with 84.3 per cent in 1987, and 74.7 per cent in the
former GDR, compared with an astonishing 93.4 per cent in March 1990.
Perhaps this was due to a degree of apathy in face of Kohl’s seemingly inevitable victory. The election law, which had been much debated, allowed parties to stand in just one part of Germany, that is, ‘election region West’ or ‘election region East’. This was designed to give smaller, but significant parties in the former GDR a better chance of getting representation. Had the earlier West German law been transferred to the whole of Germany, parties would have had to get either 5 per cent throughout the united Germany or win three seats directly. The West German Greens and Biindnis 90/Greens of the former GDR had miscalculated badly by not getting together before the election. As the figures in Table 11.3 show, they got 5 per cent together. The West German Greens lost their representation in the Bundestag with their 3.8. Their colleagues in the East gained 6 per cent in ‘election region East’. The PDS attracted only 2.4 per cent in the whole of Germany but 11.1 per cent in the East. The far-right Republicans gained 2.3 per cent in the West and 1.3 per cent in the East.

The SPD saw its vote slump in the West compared with the last two federal elections, its 35.7 per cent compared with 37 (1987) and 38.2 (1983). The only consolation for the party was that it had increased its vote compared with March in all five Länder of the former GDR. In the West, the SPD took losses everywhere except in the Saar. Lafontaine could be relieved that on his home territory his party’s vote had increased from 43.5 (in 1987) to 51.2 per cent. The CDU, on the other hand, saw its vote rise slightly in the West from 34.5 in 1987 to 35.7 per cent. In the former GDR it gained 41.8, which compared with 40.8 in the March elections. The FDP percentage rose in both parts of Germany: in the West from 9.1 in 1987 to 10.6, in the East 12.9 compared with 5.3 for the BFD in March. Biindnis 90/the Greens with 6 per cent did better than Biindnis 90 and the Greens had done fighting separately in March, when their combined total was 4.9. Kohl was riding high after his December victory, and although the SPD, the Biindnis 90/the Greens and the PDS improved their respective positions, he won again in 1994.

**Switzerland and Sweden as models?**

Some abroad still feared Germany 45 years after the end of hostilities. It is therefore worth mentioning that Kohl’s Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU/DSU) received a higher percentage vote in 1990 than the Nazis had gained in the last two democratic Weimar elections of 1932 and the not so free election of January 1933. Kohl never sought the ‘charisma’ that many claimed for Hitler. Hitler would have thought his Volk, as they were in the early 1990s, were not worthy of him. Any of Germany’s neighbours who read it would have been relieved to see the results of a survey for the daily Suddeutsche Zeitung (4 January 1991). This revealed that 40 per cent of Germans saw Switzerland as a future model for Germany. Sweden came second, attracting 29 per cent. Japan and Italy were joint third with 10 per cent each. The three Western victor states – France, the USA and Britain – attracted 8, 6 and 2 per cent respectively.

**United Germany in 2000**

In 2000, eleven years after German unity has been restored, the Federal Republic looks in remarkably good shape as the leading state in the European
Union of 15 states, 12 of them being even more closely united in the single currency, the euro. Berlin was a huge building site, and it has once again became the home of the German parliament and government. Many towns in the former GDR have been transformed. Unemployment, however, remains a problem. At the end of 1999, of the 3,900,000 ‘looking for work’ in Germany, 1,300,000 of them were in the former GDR.\(^35\) In spite of this unemployment, most East Germans are better off in material terms, not to mention personal freedom, than they were under Honecker’s SED. This is especially true of the elderly whose pensions had risen from 55.6 per cent of the West German level in 1990 to 110 per cent in July 1998.\(^36\) The PDS has survived and prospered mainly in the former GDR helped by the persisting unemployment, some inevitable GDR nostalgia, and its attempts to present itself as a left, democratic, anti-establishment party. Kohl, who did so much for German unity, and his CDU, meanwhile, have been struck a savage blow by allegations of corruption. After years in the wilderness, the Social Democrats, led by Gerhard Schröder, joined by the Greens, gained a remarkable federal election victory in 1998.

The SPD-led coalition was part of a wave which swept Labour into office in Britain, a left-of-centre government in France, and similar forces in other EU states. Austria was an exception, where the influx of foreigners seeking asylum and/or work had been an important factor in the decline of the Social Democrats. The problem of asylum seekers and migrants was one facing the whole of the EU and one which has helped the far right to consolidate in a number of states. In the united Germany these forces remain on the margin. Will they remain there?\(^37\) Other problems facing Germany and its EU partners are the ageing of their populations, the threat of ‘globalisation’, the rise of the Asian economies and the poverty in many other mainly ‘Third World’ areas. There were also threats to European security, which were as real as any posed by the Warsaw Pact before 1990 and had been almost overlooked in the euphoria of the opening of the Wall and its aftermath. It remains to be seen whether the German Social Democrats and their colleagues in the Socialist International can meet these challenges.

Notes