The Divided Nation

A History of Germany 19181990

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The East German Revolution and the End of the Post-War Era

In 1989, Eastern Europe was shaken by a series of revolutions, starting in Poland and Hungary, spreading to the GDR and then Czechoslovakia, ultimately even toppling the Romanian communist regime, and heralding the end of the post-war settlement of European and world affairs. Central to the ending of the post-war era were events in Germany. The East German revolution of 1989 inaugurated a process which only a few months earlier would have seemed quite unimaginable: the dismantling of the Iron Curtain between the two Germanies, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the unification of the two Germanies. How did such dramatic changes come about, and what explains the unique pattern of developments?

To start with, it is worth reconsidering certain features of East Germany's history up until the 1980s. The uprising of 1953 was the only previous moment of serious political unrest in the GDR. It was, as we have seen above, limited in its origins and initial aims-arising out of a protest by workers against a rise in work norms-and only developed into a wider phenomenon, with political demands for the toppling of Ulbricht and reunification with West Germany, as the protests gained momentum. Lacking in leadership, lacking in support from the West, and ultimately repressed by a display of Soviet force, the 1953 uprising was a short-lived phenomenon. From the suppression of the 1953 revolt until the mid-1980s, the GDR was a relatively stable communist state, which gained the reputation of being Moscow's loyal ally, communism effected with Prussian efficiency.

The factors explaining the relative stability of the GDR over

thirty-five years or so have been discussed in more detail in preceding chapters. These factors, in new ways, turn out to be important in examining what changed in the mid to later 1980s, and in explaining the background to and nature of the more successful revolutionary upheavals of the autumn of 1989. Three main aspects are of importance.

In the first place, the GDR unlike its close neighbours, Poland and Czechoslovakia possessed relatively cohesive elites. On the one hand, the SED, from the purges of the 1950s (19534, 1956, 1958) until the generational and other changes of the later 1980s, was a monolithic, well-disciplined party. It did not, to the outside world at least, provide evidence of splits within its midst. This stands in some contrast to the existence of a reform communist wing under the leadership of Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia in 1968, giving rise to the Prague Spring and its repression by Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks. It also stands in some contrast to the disarray evident within Polish Communism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which resulted in an ineffectual response to the challenge of the Solidarity movement in 19801 and the introduction of military rule under General Jaruzelski (domestic military power, in this case, taking the place of the threat or actuality of Soviet invasion). On the other hand, the SED was in addition not challenged by any serious alliance of potential 'counter-elites'. There was no split with or within the army; nor did the East German technical and cultural intelligentsias even begin to form a potential serious opposition, in the ways that at times they appeared to do in Czechoslovakia. Co-opted, subordinated, politically fragmented, easily exiled or allowed to leave for West Germany an identical language community, with automatic rights of citizenship potential counter-elites never developed a serious political momentum in East Germany which could have placed the power and legitimacy of the

ruling communist party in question.

This is related to the second factor of importance: the incorporation or isolation and defusing of dissent, over a relatively long period of time. During the 1960s and 1970s, intellectual dissenters remained relatively isolated figures, unable to command a mass following in the GDR. Whether isolated

by house arrest as with Havemann or by involuntary or voluntary exile to West Germany-Biermann, Bahro such dissidents failed to gain wide followings in their own country. Many prominent semi-critical writers chose to publish in West Germany, and often particularly in the later 1970s and early 1980s actually to leave for West Germany. The ease of publication in, and even emigration to, the west, took away some of the impetus for the development of a kind of samizdat network of underground publication and oppositional organization evident in, for example, Czechoslovakia.

Thirdly, such intellectual dissent as there was and it should not be underplayed simply because of the distinctive features described above in part failed to gain a mass following because of the relative lack of serious material discontent in East Germany for much of its history. After the lesson of 1953, the regime made good use of the tactic of consumer concessions to buy off the possibility of mass political unrest. Under Honecker in particular, serious efforts were put into improvements in housing, social policy, the standard of living, the availability of consumer goods, while at the same time there were cultural clamp-downs and reversals of early promises of intellectual liberalization. It should not be suggested that such policies were of a purely cynical, 'bread and circuses' nature: there were very real and genuine attempts to improve the conditions of life of East German citizens, reinforcing the obvious political considerations. What is at issue here, however, is not so much the motives behind such policies, or the causes of the relative (in East European terms) success of the East German economy, as the consequences of East German economic performance. While East Germans of course did not enjoy the standard of living of West Germans, there was nevertheless none of the deprivation which caused food riots in neighbouring Poland. East Germans could disdain the inefficiency of the Poles (thus building on

a long established tradition of disdain for their eastern neighbours), and take a modest pride in the way their own economy at least functioned without undue disruption, whatever their grumbles about its shortcomings. In Poland, part of the power of the Solidarity movement of 19801 derived from the coalescence

of intellectual and material discontents which had previously erupted separately in post-war Polish history. In East Germany, the two sides failed to come together until that fragile moment of revolutionary unity in September and October of 1989.

What changed in the 1980s, to alter this picture of stable reproduction of the East German regime? Two separate, but eventually interrelating factors are important in explaining the more immediate background to the revolution of 1989. First, the role of the church since 1978 is important. The unequal partnership between church and state represented an inherently unstable and dynamic compromise, with potential benefits for both sides, but also potential risks. For perhaps five or six years until around 1984 the experiment appeared to work, from the point of view of the state. Within the officially sanctioned autonomous space of the church, dissenting views could be voiced; but dissenting actions would also be contained, within acceptable bounds, by church leaders who did not want to jeopardize their position *vis-à-vis* the state (as, for example, in the calling off of the 'Swords-into-ploughshares' campaigns of the unofficial peace initiative). But the fostering of a muted dissent under the wing of the church spread beyond the bounds which the church could control. More specialized groups developed, focusing on issues pertaining to human rights and the environment, in addition to peace initiatives, which could no longer so easily be contained by the church.

This proliferation of dissent coincided with, and was to a degree fuelled by, a quite separate factor of major, indeed decisive, importance. In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union. Inheriting an ailing economy burdened by high defence spending, a world role it could no longer sustain, and political troubles at home, Gorbachev embarked on a radically new course in the Soviet Union, characterized by his slogans of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Not

only did he introduce measures for economic restructuring and increased political openness at home; Gorbachev's reforms, crucially, fostered expectation of change among other eastern European states in addition. This had particular implications in the GDR. Honecker and the top leadership of the SED were by

the later 1980s elderly men, and a succession question was in any event in the air. Given the resistance of the East German old guard to Gorbachev's reforms dismissed as the equivalent of putting up new wallpaper, a simple matter of redecoration which was unnecessary in the GDR the leadership question inevitably began to entail discussion of whether an East German Gorbachev might be waiting in the wings. The recognized crown prince insofar as there was one was a known hardliner, Egon Krenz; but *aficionados* started to mention the name of the relatively unknown moderate, the Dresden party chief Hans Modrow, who was not even a member of the Politburo. Such discussions about a potential alternative future aided a process of what might be called political variegation in the SED. Differences began to emerge more clearly, between regional and local leaderships on the one hand, and the hardline central leadership on the other, and between hardline functionaries and reform-minded pro-Gorbachev communists. This change in the SED revealed a wider range of political principles, aims and strategies than had been seen since the late 1950s, and was to play an important role in the development of events in the autumn of 1989. [1]

What triggered the actual revolution itself? The answer has to do, not so much with dissent or destabilization inside the GDR, as with radical transformations in the external context. These external changes were sufficiently momentous to generate a crisis of authority within the GDR, which could then in turn be exploited by internal dissenters.

Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union were viewed with interest in other communist states. Not only was a climate of reform fostered in other countries; there was also a further, and crucial, element in the new Soviet approach. This was the renunciation of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine of legitimate interference in the affairs of other states which had facilitated the military suppression of the Prague

Spring in 1968 and its replacement by what Soviet spokesman Gennady Gerasimov so disarmingly called, in a press conference in the autumn of 1989, the 'Sinatra Doctrine' of 'letting them do it their way'. In this context, in the spring and summer of 1989 the

communist regimes in Poland and Hungary underwent radical transformation, inaugurating the whole process of revolutionary change in eastern Europe.

After a decade of dealing with economic difficulty and political unrest, the Polish government collapsed, and on 16 August 1989 was replaced by a Solidarity led coalition. In Hungary, processes of self-transformation were initiated by the Communist party, and preparations made for a transition to a multi-party democracy in a state which had in any case long experimented with elements of a market economy and a more open approach to the West. It was the changes in Hungary which were to prove the proximate cause of the East German revolution. From May 1989, Hungary began to dismantle the fortified border with Austria which constituted its part of the Iron Curtain. In the summer of 1989, it became increasingly easy to cross from East to West, over the Austro-Hungarian border.

In August 1989, around 220,000 East German holiday-makers were spending their summer holidays in Hungary, which was a popular tourist destination among the rather restricted choices available to GDR citizens. For some, the easing of border restrictions proved an irresistible attraction. As some were successful in their dash to liberty, others decided to follow. Soon camps filled up close to the border, as people congregated in the hope and expectation of seizing the opportunity to flee. At first it remained a risky business, but as more and more were able to pass despite their East German passports having no valid visa for travel to the west more and more began to attempt the exodus. Abandoning homes and possessions, jobs, relatives and friends, East Germans fled in increasing numbers across the ever more permeable border to Austria, taking only what possessions they could carry. On 10 September, the Hungarian foreign minister made a decision in principle, with fundamental implications

in practice: Hungary's western border would be opened, East Germans would be free to pass as they pleased, and Hungary would no longer officially recognize or sustain the travel restrictions imposed by its fellow communist state, the German Democratic Republic.

The stream of emigrants had been turning into something of

a flood. With aid from the Red Cross, reception camps in the west were set up to give shelter and food to the swelling numbers of refugees. At first, the West German reception was ecstatic. Crowds welcomed the East German arrivals, with balloons and placards and an excited party atmosphere. Even in the cramped and less than comfortable conditions of the refugee camps, East Germans were overwhelmed with gifts of clothes and toys for the children, and offers of employment from predatory West German employers. At the same time, other East Germans watching such scenes nightly on the West German news programmes on their televisions, at home in East Germany took the decision to attempt an escape to the West also, while the going appeared to be good. Alternative routes were tried: many flung themselves into the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw. As these became full to overflowing, with makeshift tent cities sprouting in the elegant grounds of the embassy buildings, negotiations between the affected governments failed to find a means to deal with the escalating crisis. For East Germans at home, added to the scenes of East Germans driving over the Austro-Hungarian border were new scenes of train-loads of East Germans being escorted from the embassies and embarking on a different route to freedom in the West.

The East German leadership proved singularly ineffective in dealing with the refugee crisis, which gave the lie to its claims to legitimacy and challenged the very existence of the regime. (The joke was current in the summer of 1989 that the reunification of the Germans was taking place, but on West German soil.) Erich Honecker, now aged seventy-seven and in poor health, was absent from the political stage for much of the summer following a gall-bladder operation. Others failed to take decisive action in his place. In such a situation of crisis, the way was opened for a challenge from within.

The 'Gentle Revolution', 26 August9 November 1989

The period from late August until the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 constituted a distinctive phase

in the East German revolution. While its closing date 9 November very clearly forms a turning point in German history, the choice of starting date is slightly more arbitrary. Opposition had been building up, with further demonstrations on the Luxemburg Liebknecht anniversary on 15 January 1989, demanding freedom of expression and organization, and freedom of the press, and resulting in around eighty arrests; there had also been protests against alleged falsification of the results of local elections in May. But the period from late August was distinctively, qualitatively and quantitatively, different. There were three partially overlapping aspects and phases within this period of 'gentle revolution' (taken from the German phrase *sanfte Revolution*). First there was the rise of organized opposition groups, with features marking them as having taken a step beyond earlier forces of opposition, and with increasing support among the population. Secondly, there was the development of new regime policies and tactics, eventuating in the renunciation of the use of force in order to repress the revolution, and the adoption instead of a strategy of attempted 'reform from above'. Thirdly, and following from this, there were the changes in leadership, and the series of dramatic developments which culminated in the breaching of the Berlin Wall on the night of 9 November. This amounted to an opening of the floodgates; and what followed after the initial euphoria of the long weekend from 1012 November amounted to a marked deflection from this early phase of revolution.

At a human rights seminar on 256 August, a small group of participants decided, in the words of Ibrahim Böhme, that the situation was so serious ('im Moment das Haus in einer solchen Art und Weise brennt') that it was necessary to rise above general complaints and to attempt instead to organize to change the situation, 'without unnecessary and irresponsible confrontation'. 2 As a result, the

Initiative for a Social-Democratic Organization was born, which was later to turn into the official founding (on the significant date of 7 October, the GDR's fortieth anniversary) of an East German SPD. Another important early organization, which was to play a major role in the early phase of revolution, was the New Forum. This was founded on 11 September, after

a meeting in the house of Havemann's widow, by a group of people including Bärbel Bohley and Jens Reich. New Forum was intended to represent, not a party with a specific programme or platform for reform, but rather a forum for open and free discussion. It was called *New* Forum to indicate that it was intended to supplement the only existing autonomous forum for discussion, the Church, and was to provide a space for debate for non-Christians outside the Church. On 19 September it requested legalization; this was refused on 21 September; the founders then initiated a major campaign for mass pressure for legalization. While New Forum was the most important initiative for democratization, a number of other groups were also founded at this time: these included the List 2 of environmentalists, Democratic Awakening, Democracy Now, and the Left Platform.

The establishment of these groups marked a new departure in the history of East German dissent. They were no longer content with informal networks of organization under the broad shelter of the Church; rather, they now sought to develop their own nationwide organization. Moreover, they also sought recognition as legally accepted autonomous institutions, in the same way as the Church had been recognized since 1978. At the same time, their defined aims and sphere of interest widened. No longer were they solely concerned specifically with peace, human rights and environmentalism; they now sought also to consider the whole range of policies and problems associated with taking over and dramatically reforming and then running a state. Issues considered now included problems of economic policy and reform, and the means of introducing the rule of law in a *Rechtsstaat*. For the first time, dissenting groups conceived the possibility of constituting part of a potential alternative government, which would have to deal with the nitty-gritty of running the country, challenging the previously essentially unquestioned

power and future of the ruling SED. [3]

The Churches too came out with demands for reform. From a number of quarters, voices were raised demanding that the regime examine the reasons *why* so many people were trying to flee the GDR, and suggesting that if the regime were to introduce reforms, perhaps East German citizens might

be more willing to stay at home, rather than abandoning home and possessions for an uncertain future in the West. Increasing pressure was exerted on the regime to enter into dialogue, to deal with the real issues and bases of unrest, and to introduce some degree of democratization and liberalization, so that people would feel it was worthwhile to stay and work for change from within the GDR. A major centre of this activity was Leipzig. Following a regular Monday evening service in the Nikolaikirche, people would gather to form a procession, marching peacefully around Leipzig's Ringstrasse, demonstrating in favour of democratization. Home-made banners proclaimed such slogans as 'Reisfreiheit statt Massenflucht' ('freedom to travel instead of mass flight'). Consisting at first of a few thousand courageous individuals, demonstrations began to grow in size as people felt growing strength and solidarity expressed in the simple slogan, 'Wir sind das Volk' ('We are the people'). In East Berlin, the Gethsemane Church became a centre for protest, with sermons on such apparently innocuous texts as Jesus' treatment of the Pharisees gaining intense current political significance, and with peaceful, candlelit vigils for reform. Some demonstrators embarked on fasts, remaining in the church for days without food; others came for short periods of time to discuss and show solidarity. In Halle, Plauen, Dresden and elsewhere, similar demonstrations for peaceful reform began to be organized.

Initially, it was uncertain how the authorities would respond. There were early signs of splits in the ruling bloc, with the LDPD newspaper *Der Morgen* printing speeches by the Liberals' leader Manfred Gerlach in favour of discussions about reform. While some local SED functionaries clearly wanted to adopt a more conciliatory tone, the official responses at first were repressive. Despite the non-violence of demonstrators, there were numerous arrests, and instances of police

brutality. Would be emigrants were dealt with very severely when trains carrying refugees from the Warsaw and Prague embassies passed through East Germany, and there was even the death of a man who lay on the railway tracks in an attempt to halt a trainload of refugees near Dresden to allow others to board. On 3 October

the entire population of the GDR was put under virtual house arrest when visa-free travel to Czechoslovakia was banned. Honecker insisted on proceeding with the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the GDR on 7 October, more or less as planned with the slight qualification that the East German people refused to participate in the self-congratulatory birthday party. Mass demonstrations were met with brutality and numerous arrests. Despite such repression, demonstrators maintained their non-violent stance: young women at the Gethsemane Church, for example, approached members of the militia with flowers, and invited policemen to change out of their uniforms and join them in demanding democratization. Children guarded the candles which were kept alive, symbolically, with the flames of hope for a peaceful revolution. Yet many who joined the protests were deeply afraid, and not without reason. Earlier in the year, the East German regime had officially congratulated the Chinese leadership on the brutal massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Peking's Tiananmen Square.

Mikhail Gorbachev came to the GDR, to stand by Honecker's side for the anniversary parades. But he took the opportunity to advise the East German leadership that some willingness to reform was in order and that it might be time for Honecker, given his age and ill-health, to make way for a more effective leader given the current crisis. These hints were to have dramatic consequences in the next ten days.

An important turning-point in regime responses to the growing crisis came on 9 October. The usual Monday night service in Leipzig's Nikolaikirche and the subsequent demonstration were planned amid growing rumours that there would be a terrible crack-down and brutal suppression along the lines of the Tiananmen Square massacre. A huge, visible presence of police, militia, *Stasi* and works combat troops gave considerable weight to these rumours. The procession

nevertheless set off as planned, leaving the church as usual at about 6 p.m.

Somewhere between 7 and 8 p.m., a curious event or rather non-event happened. The *Stasi*, police and armed forces simply melted away. The traffic police aided the procession by halting the traffic to allow it to pass safely. The demonstration was able to

conclude peacefully. The authorities appeared to have condoned the protest and refrained from the use of repression as a strategy for dealing with the rising tide of revolution.

But which authorities? What determined this turning-point, this apparent recognition of the legitimacy of protest, this acquiescence in the right to demonstrate? Later, Honecker's short-lived successor, Egon Krenz, was to claim some recognition for his own role on this occasion. But it appears that the initiative for dialogue rather than force came from three local SED functionaries in association with the conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Kurt Masur. In the afternoon they issued a statement in favour of discussion and dialogue about the need for reforms; lacking in authority to call off the troops and police presence themselves, their approach was finally confirmed and given official backing by a telephone call from Krenz, then in charge of security affairs at the national level, at around 7.30 p.m.

This pattern began to be repeated elsewhere: some SED local leaders were, to use the German expression, more *Reformfreudig* ('enthusiastic about reforms') than others. The peaceful outcome of the 9 October demonstration gave courage to more and more people. Numbers demonstrating doubled and doubled again: in Leipzig, from a few thousands in September, to over 100,000 on 16 October, and more than a quarter of a million the following week; and increasing numbers taking to the streets in a peaceful fashion in other towns across the GDR. Support for New Forum also grew, with around twenty-six thousand signatories of the New Forum founding petition acquired by mid-October.

This turning-point inaugurated the third stage in the first, gentle, phase of the East German revolution. The official response was to institute limited reforms from above. On 18 October, at a Politburo meeting

where he failed to defend his handling of the crisis, Erich Honecker resigned and was replaced by Krenz, who lost little time in attempting to establish a new reputation as a reformer. Official discussions took place, first with church leaders (planned already by Honecker), and then on 26 October between leaders of the SED and the New Forum. By this time, New Forum had collected more than

100,000 signatures, and clearly constituted a significant force in the land. The meeting resulted in the first authorization in advance of a mass demonstration, to take place in East Berlin on 4 November. There were also local meetings between party officials and reformers in different towns, including Rostock and Dresden. The SED, formerly so uniform and disciplined in its policies, began to respond in diverse ways in different areas, with some local leaders more inclined to enter into dialogue than others. There were increasingly explicit debates about the sort of line the party should take. Splits became more evident at the national level too: fifty-two members of the *Volkskammer* refused to vote for Krenz as head of state, with members of the LDPD prominent among those abstaining or voting against.

The media began to report more accurately what was occurring, and GDR citizens began to read their own newspapers and watch their own television channels with a new interest and even amazement. On 27 October, it was announced that the ban on visa-free travel to Czechoslovakia, imposed on 3 October, would be lifted, and that there would be an amnesty for all those who had been convicted of trying to escape to the West, or who had succeeded in leaving. The line changed from 'weeping no tears' for those who had left to welcoming them back if they wanted to return. But demonstrators did not relax their pressure for further concessions: on Monday 30 October, around half a million people took to the streets in Leipzig, and there were mass demonstrations elsewhere, including, for example, around eighty thousand people on the streets of the moderately small Mecklenburg town of Schwerin. The priorities of the demonstrators began to switch, from the demand for freedom to travel to the demand for free elections, legalization of New Forum, and the disbanding of the *Stasi*.

Krenz made a trip to Moscow at the beginning of November, and

returned, after a sort of Road to Damascus, via discussions with Solidarity leaders in Poland, as a supposedly convinced reformer. The first nine days of November saw the culmination of the early phase of revolution. A breathtaking set of reforms were announced, including: the right to travel in the West although only for a maximum of thirty days in a year, with no

guarantee of either a visa or sufficient foreign currency; the establishment of a constitutional court; and the prospect of democratic elections but no renunciation of the leading role of the SED. Heads began to roll at the top: prominent figures to resign or be sacked included Margot Honecker, Minister of Education and estranged wife of Erich Honecker; Harry Tisch, leader of the FDGB; the leaders of the CDU and NDPD; and certain district SED and trade-union leaders. These were followed by more sweeping purges of the Politburo, removing key members of Honecker's old guard, including Erich Mielke, at eighty-one still in charge of the state security police, and Kurt Hager, at seventy-seven in charge of ideology. Finally, on 7 November the entire East German government resigned, and on 8 November the Politburo which had been pruned of five more of its members the previous day resigned *en bloc*. The new, smaller, Politburo was roughly split between hardliners and moderate reformers. The relatively liberal Hans Modrow, party chief in Dresden, who was to play a leading role in the next phase as the country's new Prime Minister, entered the Politburo for the first time. It was announced that there would be a new electoral law, allowing all political forces to compete and it was acknowledged that this might entail a loss of power for the SED. New Forum was legalized. Meanwhile, the constitutional and legal committee of the *Volkskammer* had refused to ratify the proposed new travel laws, and it had been announced that the refugees in the Prague embassy were free to leave.

The pressure of mass demonstrations was maintained. On 4 November, between half a million and one million people came out onto the streets of Berlin, and gathered to hear speeches made by prominent intellectuals including such figures as Christa Wolf. In Leipzig, on Monday 6 November, around half a million people took to

the streets. In the mean time, the mass exodus from the GDR continued unabated; the flood even increased. In particular, East Germans, who now no longer needed a visa to travel to Czechoslovakia, also no longer needed a certificate renouncing GDR citizenship to travel to West Germany over the Czech border; so they could, in effect, simply circumvent the Berlin Wall by making a short detour via Czechoslovakia. East

Germans started pouring out by this route at a rate of about 9000 a day, an average of 375 an hour. It was clear that the Berlin Wall was effectively redundant.

On 9 November 1989 seventy-one years to the day since the collapse of Imperial Germany an event of momentous significance occurred, signalling in effect the collapse of the East German communist regime. Towards the end of a late-afternoon press conference, Politburo member and government spokesman Günter Schabowski was asked what the implications of the new freedom to travel were for the status of the Berlin Wall. He responded, wearily, that the Wall would continue to have some sort of function, but of course not the same as before. The effects of this laconic response were electric. Journalists buzzed, rumours flew, huge crowds rapidly massed on both sides of the Wall; and, on the night of 910 November, Berlin celebrated a huge, euphoric party of reunification, with people jumping up onto the Wall, opening bottles of champagne, dancing in the streets, embracing each other, and East German border guards actually looking human ceased even attempting any control of visas or stamping of travel documents as people thronged from East to West, West to East, and back again, in their thousands. The following weekend was one of continued euphoria, as millions of East Germans took the opportunity to cross the now permeable borders to the previously forbidden land of plenty, the West, to satisfy their curiosity and return home again. Roads were clogged, traffic jams built up for miles, as choking and spluttering Wartburgs and Trabants made the journey of a lifetime. The experiment of tearing down the Iron Curtain, in the hope that people would go, look, and return to their home in the GDR, had begun. But the consequences of this dramatic development were ultimately to deflect the whole course of the East German revolution.

The Opening of the Floodgates and the Deflected Revolution

At first, the desire, pent-up for decades, to experience at first hand the glittering materialism of western consumer society

was given expression. The visual contrast between the East Germans in their ubiquitous jeans, black leather or denim jackets and third-rate cars and their affluent West German relatives was marked. After the initial euphoria, West Germans, and particularly West Berliners, began to resent the crowds, the queues for public transport, the traffic jams in border areas, the overcrowding of shops with people who had come largely only to look, with no more western currency than the West German official 'welcome money' of 100 DM, sufficient to buy little more than a bag of oranges and some small treats for the children. More ominously, the opening of the Wall had destabilizing effects for both the West and East German regimes. Far from the calculated gamble coming off with freedom to travel ensuring the survival of a separate, distinctive democratic socialist GDR the opening of the floodgates served to subvert and deflect the ideas and aims of both regime supporters and the intellectual opposition in the GDR. The result was a stampede westwards to which there could be only one solution: unification.

It was true that the vast majority of East Germans who rushed to satisfy their curiosity about the West did return, in their spluttering Wartburgs and Trabants, in their hundreds and thousands. But through December, January and February the stream of those seeking permanent residence in the West continued at a rate averaging over two thousand a day, amounting to an estimated total of little under one million people a year seeking to resettle in West Germany. This not only rendered East Germany's already fragile economy increasingly prone to collapse; it also put intolerable strains on West Germany's housing resources and social welfare system, as well as adding heavily to an already worrying unemployment rate. Apart from the obvious social problems entailed in having to house large numbers of people very rapidly, and the longer-term strains that increased

demands on welfare benefit payments would put on the taxation system, there were serious immediate political implications in West Germany.

Already in 1989 the right-wing Republican Party had been gaining political ground and exploiting resentment against immigrant populations (mainly *Gastarbeiter*), with considerable success

in Berlin, Frankfurt, and parts of Bavaria. Now it was feared that right-wing extremist forces would reap a rich harvest from the social resentments incurred by the influx of East Germans. Attitudes began to change, from the ecstatic reception accorded the East German refugees in the summer of 1989 to a distinctly more reserved response to those East Germans no longer strictly speaking 'refugees' seeking to resettle in the West during the winter of 198990.

In East Germany, too, there was a change in political mood after the opening of the borders. The fragile sense of a distinctive East German national identity, symbolized in the slogan 'Wir sind das Volk', united in opposition to the communist regime, now proved to have been merely a fleeting phenomenon of the days of 'gentle revolution'. In late November and December 1989, new notes of discord were struck, and new perceptions were gained both of their own and the other Germany. Some East Germans, who had previously remained silent and were absent when demonstrating was still fraught with dangers, now began to speak out. Others simply changed their views, partly as a result of experiencing at first hand what western 'decadent' consumerism was really like, partly as a result of mounting disillusionment with the poverty and pollution of their own country, and of shock as scandals about luxury and corruption in high places broke out. Banners proclaiming 'Wir sind das Volk' were dramatically altered in meaning with the simple substitution of one word: 'Wir sind *ein* Volk'. Calls for democratization now gave way to calls for all-German unity.

In December 1989 and January 1990, the GDR began to crumble. The Communist Party gave up its claim to a monopoly on power at the beginning of December; Krenz was stripped of his offices as party leader and head of state. Although Gregor Gysi replaced Krenz as the leader of the SED, the balance of power now effectively shifted for

the first time in the GDR's history to the government, led by Prime Minister Hans Modrow. Round-table talks began with leaders of the main opposition groups, the churches, and the increasingly independent coalition parties present. A number of former SED leaders (including Erich Honecker) and other prominent

individuals were to undergo investigation and possible criminal proceedings for corruption. A breakdown in law and order threatened, with a rise in apparent neo-Nazi activity; much use was made of this by the government in an attempt to stall the disbanding of the *Stasi*. Revelations continued to appear, not only about the extent of corruption in high places, but also about the true state of the country's economy and environment. In January 1990 it was revealed that the GDR had huge foreign debts, of around £12.9 billion (a greater per capita indebtedness than that of Poland); and that at least £72 billion would be needed simply to clean up East Germany's energy and heat production. Better water and sewerage systems were also essential. Meanwhile, the continued exodus of East Germans was rapidly exacerbating the situation. Those workers who stayed attempted to exploit the labour shortage and capitulation of the authorities with demands for wage and benefit increases worth around £15 billion. The FDGB had long lost authority and new independent unions were being established. Strikes made labour productivity even lower, while a rapidly expanding black market (particularly in Berlin) further dislocated the East German economy. Local government began to disintegrate: many regional and town councils simply dissolved themselves, giving up the attempt to maintain a semblance of administrative efficiency. Many prominent individuals deeply compromised by their activities during Communist rule committed suicide; others succumbed to depression. The domestic mood was characterized by uncertainty and increasing fear for the future.

In such a context, the elections first planned for 6 May, a date which opposition groups in the autumn had felt might even be too early for their fledgeling organizations were brought forward to 18 March. When, on 28 November 1989 Chancellor Kohl of West Germany had announced his 'ten-point plan' for a new German confederation, to be

achieved through a number of stages lasting several years, he had been denounced as being too hasty. The Soviet Union and the East German Prime Minister Hans Modrow at that time announced that 'reunification was not on the political agenda' (as did Britain's Mrs Thatcher); and East German opposition groups insisted that what they

were seeking was not take over by West German capitalism, but rather a new 'Third Way' of democratic socialism in a continuing GDR. By early February, however, the mood had changed dramatically. In the context of a disintegrating GDR, and a West Germany threatened and burdened by the strains of the opening of the Wall, there was clearly no alternative to an equalization of living conditions and an integration of the economies of the two Germanies and this inevitably implied political unification. Both Gorbachev and Modrow came to accept German unification as necessary, as did all the major East German opposition groups. When on 6 February, Kohl proposed a monetary union as soon as possible after the March elections, the only dissenting voice was that of the cautious Karl-Otto Pöhl, head of West Germany's Bundesbank who was soon brought into line, despite that institution's supposed constitutional independence. The question of the unification of the two Germanies increasingly narrowed from 'whether' to 'when and how'.

By early March 1990, the parameters of the question at least had been clarified. Unification of the two Germanies had major international implications, and was not purely a matter of domestic integration of two quite different economies and societies. As far as the major powers of the Second World War were concerned, the formula of 'Two plus Four' was agreed at a meeting of NATO and Warsaw Pact foreign ministers in Ottawa on 13 February 1990. After the East German elections, the (freely elected) governments of the two Germanies would meet to formulate their plans. There would then be a wider conference of the four former wartime Allies USSR, USA, Britain and France to approve these plans (and to relinquish their remaining rights in Berlin), plans which would finally be confirmed by a broader group of the nations involved in the Conference on Security and Co-

operation in Europe (CSCE) later in the year. A major problem at the international level related to the issue of future security arrangements. While the western powers were intent on a united Germany remaining in NATO, with the possible concession that no NATO troops should be stationed on what was formerly East German soil, the Soviet position was that a

united Germany should be neutral. The Warsaw Pact was in any case changing in nature (with the increasing independence of post-revolutionary Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from their territories), and it was clear that in a fundamentally changed world system there would need to be fundamental rethinking of European security arrangements. There were also more easily resolvable questions concerning the membership of what was East Germany, as part of a united Germany, in an enlarged European Community. In addition, for a while the unwillingness of Chancellor Kohl to confirm the inviolability of Poland's western border with Germany which Kohl legalistically insisted on reserving as a matter for a future all-German government to determine threatened to add historically resonant frictions and fears of territorial revisionism to the discussions of German unification.

At the domestic level, too, there were a number of serious questions about the manner and outcome of unification. These played a major role in the East German election campaign. By mid-February 1990, the number of 'parties' in the GDR had reached perhaps 160, although 'only' 24 were eventually to contend the elections. However, given the lack of experience and resources down to the level of typewriters and functioning telephones for most East German parties, the real issue became that of which East German political forces would gain the support of the major West German parties. In the event, the forces which had spearheaded the autumn revolution in particular New Forum were swamped and consigned to political oblivion by the entrance of the West German juggernauts. Kohl's CDU finally threw its not inconsiderable weight behind the centre-right 'Alliance for Germany'. This was made up of the Democratic Awakening (DA), the German Social Union (DSU), which had been founded as a sister party to the Bavarian CSU, and the old East German CDU, now

supposedly free of any taint of its forty-year compromise with the Communist regime. The West German SPD supported the East German SPD, which was founded the previous autumn, and which had attempted to resist being infiltrated or flooded by former SED members. The SED itself had now adopted a new image, after two name changes, as

the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). It received no western support. The West German Greens supported the East German Greens, who were in electoral alliance with a women's party. In addition, there were a number of small parties with no western support. The West German Republicans were very evident in the course of the election campaign, but a Republican party was forbidden to stand in the East German elections.

At first, opinion polls suggested a highly probable victory for the SPD. Fearing for its own future in a united Germany in which the SPD might have an in-built majority, the West German CDU began an energetic campaign to vilify the SPD as a communist party in disguise conveniently overlooking the complicity of its own partner, the East German CDU, in the Communist regime. Savage CDU attacks on the SPD were somewhat overshadowed by a last-minute scandal, in which the leader of Democratic Awakening was revealed to have worked for the *Stasi* and had to resign and be replaced within a few days of the poll. In the event, however, the East German voters faced, with the exception of the elderly, with their very first experience of genuinely free elections voted less for parties as such than on the issue of the manner and speed of unification. Kohl, as Chancellor of West Germany, was clearly in a position to determine the amount of money East Germany would receive which he had refused to give prior to free elections. He also supported the route of most rapid unification or effective take-over by West Germany under Article 23 of the West German Basic Law. This would allow reconstituted *Länder* in East Germany to apply to become part of an expanded West German federal state, with the West German constitution and laws continuing to apply. The SPD, on the other hand, preferred the potentially slower route implied by Article 146 of the Basic Law. This would mean the coming together of the two

German governments to devise a new constitution for a new united Germany in effect, there would be a genuine merger, with the possibility of safeguarding certain rights to social benefits enshrined in East German law. As the prospect of unification became ever more immediate, with West German entrepreneurs exploring the possibilities of acquiring East German enterprises, and West Germans with

legal claims to expropriated properties in the East beginning to institute legal proceedings, many East Germans began to be more concerned about safeguarding certain fundamental elements of their existence, particularly in connection with low rents, guaranteed employment, and extensive provisions for child care.

In the event, the vote of 18 March 1990 was a decisive one in favour of rapid unification and the introduction of the West German Deutschmark under conservative auspices. The scale of the centre-right victory, with over forty-eight per cent of the vote, was decisive, even though a coalition would be required for putting through key constitutional changes. The masses, who for decades had suffered in passivity or retreated into their private niches of 'grumbling and making do', finally had their hour; and once again, the dissident intellectuals found themselves isolated. From the point of view of those who had led the peaceful revolution in the autumn, this was a deflection indeed from the vision of democratic socialism which had given them the courage, in the early days, to risk their lives on the streets. The 'Third Way', once again in German history, appeared in this moment of historical transformation to represent, not so much a 'missed opportunity' as an unattainable mirage. The logic of the capitalist economy in an ironic vindication of the materialistic determination of history appeared to be having the last word.

The End of a Divided Nation?

The months following the East German elections saw the detailed discussion of practical aspects of unification of the two Germanies, and the inauguration of radical processes of transformation in a number of areas.

Given continuing economic problems, an equalization of socio-economic conditions across East and West Germany was clearly

essential. Currency union was effected on 1 July 1990, with the West German Deutschmark replacing the East German currency at the favourable exchange rate of one to one as far as wages and pensions were concerned (and variable rates for

different levels of savings and different age-groups). Overnight, East German shops were stocked with a wide range of West German goods but at West German prices, with subsidies removed from basic foodstuffs. Fearful of potential rising unemployment, a predictable consequence of the privatization of the economy, most East Germans at first seemed content to remain prudent, stare, and save their new hard currency reserves. Workers in some industries staged strikes in favour of West German wage levels to contend with West German prices. Those less well placed to negotiate, such as pensioners, expressed fears about their ability to pay hugely increased housing costs. There were even fears about whether some people would be entitled to stay in their homes at all, as former owners came from West Germany to stake a claim to property which had been confiscated or abandoned in an earlier period. Agreements were reached in principle over certain issues: the legal claims to ownership of West Germans whose property had been taken by the East German state after 1949 were to be recognized, but not those whose property had been expropriated by the Soviet military government in the period 19459. But clearly many individual cases would still be disputed in practice, with difficulties for all concerned. In any event the housing market was likely to change dramatically, as affluent West Germans would pour in to snap up cheap bargains which they had the wherewithal to renovate.

As far as the economy was concerned, a considerable period of dislocation and difficulty was likely to ensue, although the officially expressed hope was that the introduction of market forces into East Germany would eventually render a united Germany as affluent and productive as West Germany had been and that the West German economy was in any event buoyant enough to carry and buffer the shocks of the transitional period, while its democracy was strong

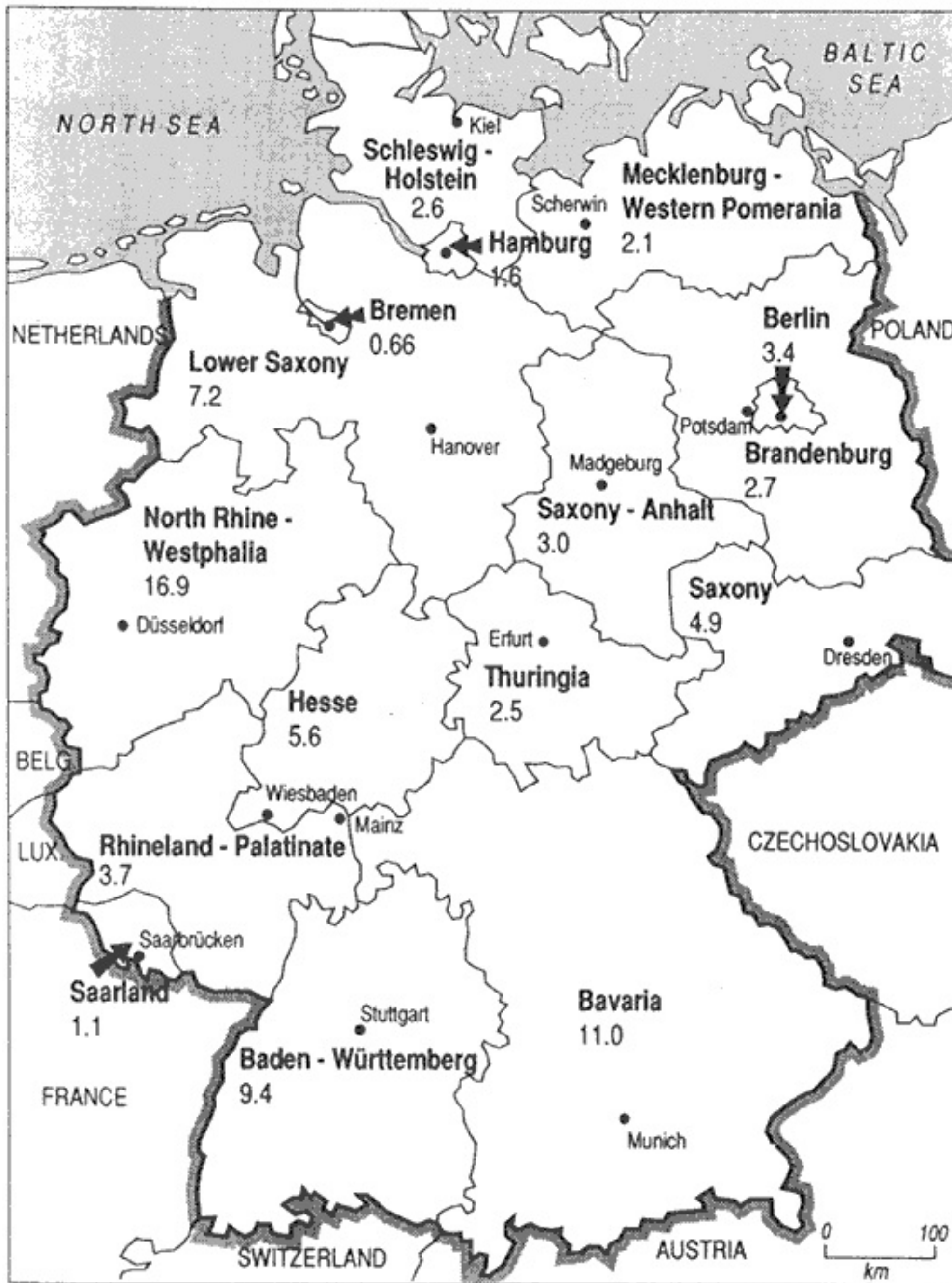
enough to withstand any social and political fall-out. EC partners were assured that the economic giant a united Germany would become eventually could only strengthen, not threaten, the economic well-being of other members of the European Community.

It seemed for some time that most difficulties would be experienced at the international level, over the issue of security

arrangements. Faced with increasing political problems at home, Gorbachev's line on a united Germany's membership of NATO wavered between ambiguous and recalcitrant. Yet it was clear that the Warsaw Pact was no longer a cohesive body posing a serious military threat; and by 6 July 1990, a two-day NATO summit was able to issue the 'London Declaration' announcing a radical reconceptualization of its role and effectively declaring peace, as one newspaper headline put it, on the Warsaw Pact. Little over a week later, on 16 July after discussions in Moscow and the Caucasus between Chancellor Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev, the latter was able to announce that he no longer objected to membership of a united Germany in NATO. Warsaw Pact troops would be withdrawn from the territory of East Germany in phases over a four-year period, and the new, post-unification domestic military force of a united Germany would be reduced from the number produced simply by combining existing East and West German troops. The way finally seemed open for the 'Two-plus-Four' process to work out the remaining problems concerning the external aspects of the unification of two Germanies, catching up with the rapid momentum on the domestic front and paving the way for final political unification. Although precise details of the reorganization of European affairs at the international level had yet to be worked out, with negotiated NATO troop reductions and an enhanced role for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), it was clear that the Cold War had been officially pronounced to be over.

On the national political front, consensus began to be reached among most West and East German political parties that, given the effective economic union, a common political administration was desirable sooner rather than later. Plans were formulated for the official reconstitution of the former East German *Länder* in the autumn of

1990, allowing an orderly application for accession to the Federal Republic under Article 23 of the Basic Law. Yet in the course of the summer of 1990, as the details of the unification treaty were being hammered out between officials in Bonn and East Berlin, conditions in the GDR continued to deteriorate. Far from alleviating the economic problems, currency union seemed merely to have exacerbated East Germany's difficulties.



United Germany, 1990
Länder population figures in millions

West German investment failed to materialize on any significant scale; plans for massive privatization of state-owned companies had to be shelved; bankruptcies loomed, and many East Germans found themselves retaining their jobs only on conditions of 'nil hours short-time working'. Women who had relied on state child care facilities were forced to make new decisions about whether they would be able to continue going out to work. Many men and women had no choice at all: they were simply made redundant. Even the East German tourist trade collapsed, despite the West Germans' new-found interest in exploring a long-ignored part of their 'homeland'. After a brief foray, most found it preferable to make day trips from the comfort of West German tourist facilities close to the now-open border, while, with the change to western hard currency, the former flocks of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian visitors could no longer afford their customary fortnight on the Baltic coast.

In such circumstances, the negotiations over the terms of unification were conducted with all the initiative on the West German side. It was exceedingly difficult for East Germans to bargain over the retention of certain social rights when only rapid unification might avert total disaster. Certain issues-particularly the question of the right to abortion on demand in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, available only to East German women proved so contentious that they had to be shelved for ultimate resolution by a post-unification all-German parliament. In the East German parliament, tempers frayed, the coalition fell apart, and criticisms mounted of Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière's apparent role as Helmut Kohl's puppet. Finally, at the end of August, the vote was taken: unification was to take place on 3 October 1990, as soon as possible after the CSCE had formally given its approval, and even before the *Länder* elections scheduled for 14 October.

On 3 October 1990 the two Germanies 'celebrated' their unification. Solemn and sombre speeches were made by the key politicians and the President, as Germans entered a new stage of their history with full awareness both of the legacies of the past and the difficulties of the future. While the official ceremonies took place in the centre of Berlin, at the Brandenburg Gate and

the Reichstag, demonstrations elsewhere were firmly dealt with by armed police. Less than a year after the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the GDR, the GDR was no more; but the formal unification of the two Germanies was effected in distinctly less euphoric mood than that accompanying the fall of the Berlin Wall only eleven months earlier.

Distinctions between '*Wessis*' (westerners) and '*Ossis*' (from the former GDR) became more vitriolic, as the latter felt they had been downgraded to second-class citizens. Social tensions contributed to a rise in racial tensions. Many Germans felt distinctly uneasy about the new nationalism, the rise in xenophobia and anti-'foreigner' sentiments (thus designated, even when the victims of racial hostility were German citizens). Many, too, felt uneasy about the new problems of 'overcoming the past' with respect, no longer to Nazism but to the GDR. On the one hand, there were serious problems connected with 'de-Stasification'. What roles had now prominent individuals perhaps played in the past? Who had been a *Stasi* collaborator? Which of one's friends could one no longer trust; who might have acted as an informer? What was held on file about oneself, whether true or untrue, and what implications might such information have for the future? What in any event would happen with the *Stasi* archives? On the other hand, there were fears of a witch-hunt including the ousting and professional destruction of the most harmless fellow-travellers of the GDR regime a regime, it should be noted, which had far more humanitarian and egalitarian goals than its Nazi predecessor, whatever the distortions and repressions in practice. How was the education system to be transformed, and what was to be done in the sphere of the media? Along with the huge material costs of reconstructing the economy of the GDR, there were clearly going to be immense personal and human costs. For the time being, Chancellor Kohl sought

to downplay potential problems and suppress anxieties; but the realities and not only in tax bills and interest rates would soon have to be faced.

Nevertheless, in the general election of December 1990 the first all-German free elections since November 1932 Helmut Kohl and the CDU received a resounding victory, a

reward for seizing the initiative and powering the unification process subsequent to the collapse of the GDR. As the crisis in the Gulf, provoked by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, began to divert attention away from the German and European stage, it rapidly become clear that the new, united, sovereign Germany would have to face up to many hard questions about its future role in a rapidly changing world.

Thus by the end of 1990, the 'post-war period' the division of Europe, and the world, between the superpowers, which had been inaugurated by a Second World War launched from German soil had finally come to an end. While the post-unification future in this moment of historical transformation remained open, the immediate past had very clearly been consigned to history. Let us turn, finally, to some wider reflections on the long sweep of German history from 1918 to 1990.