

Chapter 9
**1989–1990:
The End of the Cold War
and Challenges for Europe**

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The Difficulty of Remembering—Differences in Assessment

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War and the upheavals and revolutions in Central Europe, it is significant that internationally, German unification counts as a great success story. I can only share this perspective: 1989-90 was the happiest hour for the Germans! Forty-five years after we Germans had brought so much terror and horror to all of Europe, we had the opportunity to live in freedom and democracy, united again, and with the acceptance of all our neighbors. I wouldn't ever have dared to dream that I would experience this!

At the same time, there is currently a discussion in Germany that focuses on dissatisfaction with the way unification has evolved. Particularly in eastern Germany there is a feeling among some that they were “colonized” by the West and that their contribution to German unity remains underappreciated.

Of course, when it comes to describing and assessing events 30 years ago differences are apparent not only in Germany. Poland and Hungary, who blazed the trail for freedom and democracy with the militant slogan “back to Europe” and were the paragons of transformation in the 1990s, have become symbols of a considerable Euroskepticism under their current governments. Anti-liberal politics and nationalist goals are gaining ground and upending European politics—and not just in these countries. How we remember the revolutionary years 1988 - 1991 has become a battleground for values and different points of view.

If 30 years ago Gorbachev's policies were an essential prerequisite for change, in today's Russia he is largely regarded as the gravedigger of former (imperial) grandeur. For current Russian President Vladimir

Putin, “the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century” was the disintegration of the Soviet Union and not, for example, Stalin’s crimes or Hitler’s destructive war. While the Soviet Union was ready to grant full sovereignty to united Germany in 1990, today’s Russia does not accept the sovereignty of its neighboring nations. The annexation of Crimea and the hidden war in eastern Ukraine are only the most obvious examples of this. International law and common values, as they were celebrated in the 1990 Charter of Paris, are under great pressure today. Worries about a new Cold War are circulating.

Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to connect memories of the upheavals at that time with an analysis of current challenges, because our challenge is how the values that were asserted and proclaimed then can be realized today. The situation is made even more challenging by the fact that under President Trump there is now an administration in power in the United States that similarly disparages these values.

In this chapter I will limit myself essentially to events and experiences in Germany and keep things as personal as possible. In the process, however, it is necessary to keep in mind that these German events did not take place separately from their European and global contexts.

The Peaceful Revolution in the GDR in 1989: Opening the Prospect for German Unity

On February 4, 1989, two Protestant pastors, Martin Gutzeit and I, decided to establish a Social Democratic Party in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). This was by no means a spontaneous idea, but rather the logical consequence of a long pre-history and previous joint work.

At the time of our decision, we did not suspect that two days later, round table negotiations would begin in Poland. The result of these was that for the first time in the Eastern bloc semi-free elections took place that led to Tadeusz Mazowiecki becoming Poland’s non-communist prime minister.

How much things were fermenting in Central Europe at this time was something that I first experienced first-hand in Hungary in October 1988. I was on my way to Romania, where Ceausescu had begun a

village destruction program that was attracting great international attention and generating tensions with Hungary. Hungarian society was starting to change very rapidly. I found this fascinating. In the reigning party (MSZP), János Kádár had been replaced and decisions had been made about economic reforms that were still inconceivable for the GDR. Nevertheless, the economic crisis deepened, which caused polemics against the Hungarian reforms in the GDR press. The democratic opposition was organizing itself; the dissidents had a “network of free initiatives” and founded the “Democratic Forum.” Countless associations arose, the historical Hungarian parties and a first free trade union were established. The opposition’s *samizdat*, or underground pamphlets and materials, was growing in circulation and was influencing public debate. Starting in 1987 in the *samizdat* newspaper “BESZÉLŐ,” a program of the opposition called a “social contract” appeared that put increasing pressure on the MSZP.

The essential background for these Central European developments and also for our own actions were the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev. He had been the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since 1985. He proclaimed the need for “new thinking,” and with *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union he set in motion a reform process that gave us hope, even if it was clear that his intention was to reform communism in order to preserve it. However, at the same time it was perceptible in his speeches that he was not wearing blinders like the communist leaders that we had known. He seemed to really want to solve problems and to have an understanding of global challenges, from the necessary reconfiguration in the security sector with respect to global armament as well as with regard to ecological questions. In his speech to the United Nations in December 1988, he endorsed the “principle of the freedom of choice,” which he declared to be “a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions” and dedicated himself to

the increasing varieties of social development in different countries. (...) This objective fact presupposes respect for other people’s views and stands, tolerance, a preparedness to see phenomena that are different as not necessarily bad or hostile, and an ability to learn to live side by side while remaining different and not agreeing with one another on every issue.¹

This was the rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine, proclaimed on the world stage: independent developments might be possible in the Soviet Union's own satellite states without having tanks roll again. We slowly began to hope that something could really change. In Poland and Hungary, things had developed further, which gave us in the GDR courage, because the questions with which we were confronted were essentially the same. Our concern was to finally create the prerequisites for enabling the opposition to act politically. The decision to seek new organizational structures outside the church and to establish a Social Democratic Party was a very conscious change of strategy for us. Even after the fact it sounds daring, but we were striving for a basic and categorical change: an overcoming of the communist system. With the founding of the party, we were posing the *de facto* question of power; we wanted a parliamentary democracy of the Western kind.

Up to that point, we had not believed that we could really change anything with our actions, never mind achieve democracy or overcome the division of Germany. It was more a moral action. The concern was to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning or, as Václav Havel put it, "to live in truth" in the midst of this empire of lies. We had concerned ourselves with the German resistance to National Socialism (NS). We considered this resistance important even if it did not bring down the NS system; to a certain extent, it salvaged Germans' honor. We looked at ourselves in similar vein: we wanted to put an end to our silence and do something! It was important in specific instances to say NO clearly.

Martin Gutzeit and I came from a Protestant tradition. We both grew up with a critical distance from the socialist state and its ideology. There were conflicts when we were in school and we were refused higher education. Both of us rejected military service completely. We did not even join the *Bausoldaten* (a military service without weapons that existed only in the GDR, although each of us also managed to avoid the usual imprisonment. Thus, we received our education only in church institutions independent of the state. We met in 1974 at the *Sprachenkonvikt*, a theological university of the Protestant church in Berlin, where a course of study completely free of communist influence was possible, one that was in no way inferior to Western universities. These theological universities—there were two more in Naumburg

and Leipzig—were places of spiritual freedom that were otherwise difficult to find in the GDR.

In addition to these theoretical considerations, starting with a small group in 1976 we began to become politically active in small steps. We duplicated political texts on old printing machines and distributed them to people. These included lectures by Rudolf Bahro about his book *Die Alternative* and the “memory logs” of Jürgen Fuchs about his imprisonment by the *Staatssicherheit*. There had always been such student groups in the GDR. Frequently, participants were imprisoned and—at least in the later years—landed in the West in the end. We were lucky and did not get caught.

I assumed a position as vicar in 1980 and as a pastor in 1982 in a village in Mecklenburg on Lake Müritz. Martin Gutzeit assumed a position nearby. In these years, groups arose in many parts of the GDR that concerned themselves critically with questions regarding peace and the environment. Over the years, the range of topics became ever more varied and fundamental. In my village in Mecklenburg in 1982, I founded such a peace circle. Participants came from all around the region. At the same time, we created networks in order to bring the various groups into contact with one another and to enable cooperation. In Mecklenburg, beginning in 1981 this included the *Arbeitsgruppe Frieden* (Peace Working Group) and the GDR-wide delegate conference *Frieden konkret* (Practical Peace), which had been meeting annually since 1983. Beginning in 1982 we in Mecklenburg organized the *Mobile Friedensseminare* (Mobile Peace Seminars) for a week at the beginning of August. At these seminars, participants from all over the GDR and from abroad formed groups in various locations around the region focusing on different political topics; in the end, there was a larger joint public event commemorating the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Through these networks and seminars, many opposition activists got to know each other in the first half of the 1980s. This was an essential prerequisite for the Peaceful Revolution years later. These—mostly church—groups sought change in crucial social questions. The topics were broad and varied: the agenda included security questions, parenting and education concepts, environmental problems, human and minority rights, as well as global development strategies. Individuals perceived themselves differently in these groups than otherwise in this communist state; here, they were

responsible for the community, they learned and experienced solidarity. Therefore, to a certain extent, these political groups became schools of civil courage and responsibility.

Frequently, people say that these groups arose under the umbrella of the church. However, it is more correct to say that most of these groups arose within the church, were established by politically engaged Christians, who at the same time were open to cooperation with others. Until the end of the 1980s, these groups' networks found their place within the church. At the same time, groups that also emphasized their independence from the church were in intense contact with church-leading representatives and used them as intermediaries as well as their institutional and organizational possibilities.

The churches were the only large organizations in the GDR with their own independent and (for the Protestant church) democratic structures. They had their own facilities and a certain openness, even if it was limited. As becomes clear from Gutzeit's biography and mine as well, the church's own educational resources were also important. The church had people who were trained in its own spiritual tradition and practiced in free communication. Thus, it was no wonder that in many places engaged Christians, pastors, and church employees played an outsized role in the establishment of opposition movements and the moderation of the round tables.

The Soviets gave the churches in their occupied zone of Germany more freedom than in other countries of the Eastern bloc since they recognized the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church) of the NS era as resistance. Its representatives occupied leading positions in the Protestant church after 1945. The church's social significance was further enhanced by its youth work, which still represented a field of conflict with state authorities who were operating under the rule of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED).

In the churches themselves, at the start of the 1980s socio-politically active groups were controversial; this dispute affected all levels, from church communities to the leadership levels. Some people understood this political work as an important dimension of Christian proclamation; others regarded it as foreign infiltration and instrumentalization of the church for political purposes. Acceptance of the political groups increased within the church structures, however, when in 1983 the

Ecumenical Council of Churches in Vancouver called for a “conciliar process for justice, peace, and the preservation of creation”—and thus took up the topics that were the focus of these groups’ work. When in 1988–89 the churches in the GDR called an “ecumenical assembly for justice, peace, and the preservation of creation,” many representatives of these groups participated and significantly influenced the results. At this assembly, I myself led the working group on development policies and then also had the opportunity to participate in the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in May 1989. The substantive results of the assembly in the GDR were incorporated a few months later in various places, among others in the programmatic introductions of the new opposition movements in fall 1989, since a number of their members were among the founders of the various new movements and parties of the opposition.

By 1987, many people in the opposition hoped that the SED “would learn from the Soviet Union (under Gorbachev)” and could make improvements by initiating a step-by-step reform process from above. This perspective dissolved after SED leader Erich Honecker took massive action against the opposition after his visit to Bonn that year. The storming of the *Umweltbibliothek* (Environmental Library) in November 1987 and the imprisonments and deportations to the West at the start of 1988 in connection with the Rosa Luxemburg/Karl Liebknecht demonstration represented a turning point. For Martin Gutzeit and for me, but also for others, it became clear that new forms of opposition were needed. The church alone could no longer form the basis for these activities. We had increasing hope that essential change might be possible—but it would have to be asserted. The church could incite people and encourage them toward freedom-oriented thinking and action—and we had done that for years—but the church could not present programmatic opposition. Therefore, at the start of 1989, we decided to establish a Social Democratic Party in the GDR.

Why didn’t two Protestant pastors want to establish a Christian party? I have answered this question frequently: for theological reasons. We wanted to resist any political instrumentalization of Christian belief for political purposes. The Bible cannot really justify practical transport or health policies, it can only provide a basic ethical orientation; no party may claim that it is more Christian than another. Every

individual must focus on the dignity of human beings and therefore enable the weak to participate and integrate.

But why did we decide to establish a Social Democratic Party?

In my programmatic lecture upon the establishment of the party on October 7, 1989, the 40th birthday of the GDR, I justified this in three ways.

First, we placed ourselves in the tradition of Germany's oldest democratic party, through which the disadvantaged and downtrodden became the subjects of political action in the 19th century. Accordingly, with this establishment we wanted to leave space so that subjects in the GDR could become citizens, political subjects who assume responsibility for their own reality.

Second, with the establishment of this party, we placed ourselves in an international context in order to do justice to global challenges and overcome the provincialism of the communist GDR. Willy Brandt's report on North-South issues,² Olof Palme's report about joint security,³ and Gro Harlem Brundtland's report about sustainable development⁴ were all important orientation points.

Third, by establishing a Social Democratic Party we were withdrawing the social democratic hand from the symbol of the SED party badge (the handshake of Pieck and Grotewohl, KPD and SPD) and withdrawing its ideological legitimation from the SED. This went to the roots of the self-definition of the SED—and it was intentional. We were objecting to the SED's monopoly on truth and power and we wanted it to face up to the need for legitimation from citizens.

With the establishment of this party, we anticipated the break with the dictatorial system of the GDR and at the same time called for the right to define ourselves politically in the framework of democratic plurality—and to fight as an alliance of democratic initiatives for the formation of democratic institutions and structures. In contrast to some others in the opposition, we demanded not just democratic reforms (which would be created by those in power). Our concern was to create the institutional prerequisites to guarantee adherence to human rights and democratic participation through rule of law and division of powers. For this, however, it was necessary to be prepared to assume political responsibility.

During the first half of 1989, I tried, in discussions with various comrades-in-arms in the opposition, to advocate for participation in our project. Of course, this could only happen in secret, but these efforts met with little success. Most people did not want any parties and democracy of a Western kind, but instead were still striving for a basic democracy of any kind. Over the summer, a series of friends in the opposition became aware of our project, including people who themselves later established other movements. Thus, it is possible to say that all groupings that later selected other organizational approaches consciously stepped away from our approach.

I issued our appeal on August 26, 1989, in the final plenary session of a seminar about human rights questions (it was the 200th anniversary of the declaration of citizens' and human rights in the French Revolution). The formal establishment of the party, with elections, took place on October 7. In the course of September, other initiatives of the opposition came to light, such as *Neues Forum* and *Demokratie Jetzt*, which regarded themselves as forums for public dialogue about necessary social changes. On October 4, 1989, the *Kontaktgruppe der Opposition*, comprised of representatives from different opposition groups, met for the first time; important agreements were made here. This is also where the suggestion on November 10 for the establishment of a round table originated, which then met from December 7 to the middle of March and prepared the first free East German election.

Crucial for the success of the Peaceful Revolution were both the common political action of the democratic opposition and the mass demonstrations that lent this action the necessary weight. When 70,000 people appeared on the streets of Leipzig on October 9, 1989, the commanders did not dare to deploy the troops on hand and end the demonstrations with force. I experienced this in Magdeburg, where between 5,000–8,000 people had gathered. We were in the Magdeburg Cathedral. The armed troops were down by the Elbe River, but they did not intervene in the end. From that point on I was convinced: we would succeed in establishing a democracy!

After the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, contact between the Social Democrats in the East and West became important. Before then, we hadn't made contact with them. Crucially, this happened entirely on our own authority. However, in connection with the establishment of

the party, we turned to Willy Brandt as Chair of the Socialist International (SI) and applied for membership. Willy Brandt reacted quickly and sent Swedish Social Democrats to make contact with us. After the fall of the Wall, he invited us to the SI council meeting in Geneva, where we received status as observers in November 1989.

The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. It was totally unexpected. The SED had no intention of opening the Wall; it was seeking to render it more transparent. Just beforehand the Central Committee of the SED had agreed to a new travel regulation that would give every GDR citizen the right to apply for travel to the West. Previously such applications required a specific reason, for instance family circumstances. Now no such reasons would be needed in such applications. Poles and Hungarians had long enjoyed such rights; now this was to apply to GDR citizens as well. On November 9, however, when Günter Schabowski, a leading SED spokesman, announced the new regulation to a press conference, he gave the impression that GDR citizens could simply travel to the West without first applying to do so. Masses gathered at the checkpoints to West Berlin and pressed the Wall open; there was no shooting, as there had also been none at the mass demonstrations in the previous weeks.

Suddenly, peacefully, everything was different. Since October 9, we were, as I have just described, increasingly certain that we would succeed in establishing democracy in the GDR. It was also clear to us at the time, however, that two democratic German states divided by a wall would be absurd; it was not a viable proposition. Our belief that we now had a real chance for democracy meant that for us the Wall had already lost its menacing nature. It was not clear what the options would be, but the hope that German unity could be achievable was already apparent.

In October 1989 we did not focus on specific ways we could help make this happen, because Europe and the Soviet Union were in the midst of dynamic changes. Possibilities were likely to become clearer with time—that was our perspective before November 9.

With the fall of the Wall, the realization of democracy in East Germany and the question of German unity were now simultaneously on the agenda. Yet it remained unclear how the process could unfold. The stance of the Soviet Union remained uncertain. Moscow, Washington, London and Paris still retained their Four Power Rights over all of

Germany. Negotiations would certainly also have to take place with the Federal Republic of Germany.

On December 3, 1989, the Executive Board of the East-SPD issued a declaration in which it committed itself to unity, at the same time, however, making clear that this must be designed by both German states, and in such a way that nobody must fear it, neither the socially weak nor Germany's European neighbors. Equally, recognition of Poland's western border was necessary. The first delegates' conference on January 14, 1990 declared:

The goal of our policy is a united Germany. A government of the GDR led by Social Democrats will take the necessary steps on the path to German unity in cooperation with the government of the Federal Republic. That which is possible immediately should happen immediately. A Social Democratic government will take as its first and foremost task an economic and currency agreement. All steps of the German unity process must be integrated into the pan-European unity process, for we want German unity only with the agreement of all our neighbors. For us their borders are inviolable. We are striving for a framework of European security and peace. We regard as our particular responsibility the encouragement of the democratization process and economic renewal in Eastern Europe.

The round table that had been working since December 1989 had the task of negotiating the conditions for free elections, ensuring the government would hold them, and dissolving the state security services. The government formed after the election on March 18, 1990 under Prime Minister Lothar de Mazière of the *Allianz für Deutschland*, a CDU-led coalition of parties, for which I served as Foreign Minister, confronted the challenge of establishing German unity in negotiations with the Federal Republic. Originally, we had intended to pursue the "merger" of the two Germanys via Article 146 of the Federal Republic's Basic Law, which provided that the Basic Law—essentially West Germany's constitution—would cease to have effect whenever the whole German people adopted a constitution in a free election. With the election results of March 18, 1990, however, it was clear that unification would take place as accession via Article 23 of the Basic Law, by which the eastern *Länder* would accede to the FRG's structures. The large

majority of the East German population wanted things this way. It was the legally easier and thus faster way.

In the subsequent coalition negotiations with the East-CDU, we asserted that it would be recorded explicitly that accession would only take place after treaty negotiations in which the conditions of unity were negotiated. It was clear to us that such negotiations were necessary in the interest of East Germans, for it would not be so easy to combine legal and social structures that were so different. At the time, many East Germans underestimated the significance of such negotiations and believed some promises that “immediate unity” would also mean “immediate prosperity” without having to worry about the specific conditions.

For want of space I cannot describe the many details associated with the path to unity and the different positions of the various sides. For us as the East-SPD, contact with the West-SPD was important, yet we faced a growing problem given the great differences within the West-SPD and specifically the positioning of Oskar Lafontaine, the party’s candidate for Chancellor. The older generation of West German Social Democrats, led by Willy Brandt, were ardent supporters of German unity. The feeling of belonging to a common nation had diminished among members of the successor generation, however. Oskar Lafontaine felt more at home in Tuscany or in France than in Dresden, Leipzig or Rostock. He treated the idea of the “nation” as a backward-looking concept. This made it hard to develop a common political strategy.

The process of German unity was also burdened by the fact that 1990 was also an election year for the *Bundestag*. Helmut Kohl, whose poll ratings were decidedly poor at the end of 1989, saw—correctly as it turned out—the opportunity to win the election and declined West-SPD leader Hans-Jochen Vogel’s offer at the start of 1990 to manage this process in a joint national effort. For Kohl, the unification process was also a great election campaign. Domestic unification politics played a central role in every decision he made. For example, his behavior with regard to the border question with Poland made this abundantly clear: he always kept in mind the opinions and sensitivities of the conservative *Vertriebenen/expellees*.

German Unity in the European and International Context

Foreign policy questions did not play a large role in the 1990 election. The immediate concerns were questions of internal unity, such as the role of the Deutsche Mark as a currency for all of Germany, and issues related to economic and monetary union. We Social Democrats wanted to design German unity so that even our European neighbors would not have to fear it. This was not accentuated by the conservative parties, but it was also not really very controversial. Therefore, there was no dispute about the foreign policy passages of the coalition agreement. The government declaration of Prime Minister de Maizière on April 19, 1990 incorporated all the important statements of the coalition agreement.

For us, it was of central importance that we accepted the responsibility stemming from our history. This happened on April 12, 1990 in a declaration of the East German parliament, the *Volkskammer*, during its second session, when the new ministers of the de Maizière government were sworn in. This declaration stated:

During the time of National Socialism, Germans caused the people of the world immeasurable suffering. Nationalism and racial fanaticism caused genocide, especially for Jews from all European countries, the peoples of the Soviet Union, the Polish people, and the peoples of the Sinti and Roma. This guilt may never be forgotten. From it we want to derive our responsibility for the future.

The SED had always denied such responsibility. In its view, the GDR stood by the side of the illustrious Soviet Union, to a certain extent by the side of the victor of the Second World War and of progress. Because according to its ideology history was always the history of class struggles, it believed itself free of any national responsibility. This is how anti-fascism also quickly became a legitimization ideology for the SED leadership. There was no reappraisal of National Socialism that reflected the incorporation of society and the responsibility of the individual in the Communist GDR. There was no *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (effort to overcome the legacies of the Nazi past) in the Western sense either. Even in earlier years, only the Protestant churches and various oppositional groups were aware of a responsibility stemming

from the nation's guilty history, and they tried to do justice to this through concrete activities.

For the democratic GDR, this admission of guilt on April 12, 1990 was intended to be an essential basis of its policies. Whereas relations with neighboring European countries were previously marked by communist ideology and association with the Soviet sphere of influence within the East-West conflict, they would now be redesigned completely and put on a new basis.

The acknowledgment of responsibility that stemmed from the past for us as Germans, also in the GDR and together with the Federal Republic of Germany, was supposed to make clear on which spiritual and moral basis both the unification of Germany and, until that time, the foreign policy of the GDR, would be founded. This declaration was of special significance for our relations with our eastern neighbors, who had suffered with us under communist dictatorship, but who had also been thoroughly inculcated with the historical amnesia of the GDR.

It was also important to convey that we would not just act as if our only responsibilities derived from the atrocities of the war. We could not suppress the guilt of the communist period; it too had to be incorporated into the national responsibility. This dimension played an important role both with respect to the Jewish people and Israel and with respect to Czechoslovakia. The joint declaration unfurled this responsibility in four different directions and tried to substantiate and update them.

First was the responsibility to the Jewish people. In its depiction of National Socialism, the SED had always minimized the *Shoah* (Holocaust). The *Volkskammer* asked for forgiveness for the "hypocrisy and animosity of official GDR policy with respect to the state of Israel and for the persecution and abasement of Jewish citizens in our country even after 1945." The practical political consequence was that Jewish religion and culture had to be promoted and protected, and cemeteries, synagogues, and memorials maintained and cared for. Even if German unity was about to occur, for symbolic reasons, talks to establish diplomatic relations between the GDR and Israel had to be initiated. Persecuted Jews would be granted asylum in the GDR. To the consternation of the government of the Federal Republic, we implemented this resolution very quickly, with the consequence that even in 1990 and in the

years that followed (for the Federal government saw no opportunity to stop this after unification) there was a significant immigration of Jews, which has measurably enriched Jewish life in Germany.

Second, it was also important to us to place future relations with the Soviet Union in historical context. We did not want to identify the Russians and the other peoples of the Soviet Union with Stalin and communism. We wanted to make clear that Russians and the other people of the Soviet Union were largely themselves victims of communist dictatorship, just as Germans were Hitler's first victims. We understood German guilt for the invasion of the Soviet Union and wanted reconciliation. We also wanted to make clear that Gorbachev and the changes in the Soviet Union had made a significant contribution to the victory of freedom and democracy in our country. We believed that this should be considered in the future design of Europe. We believed that peace and security in Europe could only be guaranteed if Germany and the USSR were both be integrated into a pan-European security system. We further declared that the treaties signed by the GDR and the USSR should be adjusted by mutual agreement to the new realities.

Third, with regard to Czechoslovakia, the *Volkskammer* acknowledged the complicity of the GDR in the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968 by troops from the Warsaw Pact and apologized: "In fear and despondency, we did not prevent this violation of international law. The first freely elected parliament of the GDR apologizes to the peoples of Czechoslovakia for the injustice done." At the time, we did not yet know that, at the last minute, the National Peoples' Army did not, in fact, march into Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Fourth, the relationship to Poland has special significance in conjunction with German reunification. Over the decades of communist rule there was opposition and resistance in all of the Central and East European countries. Particularly since the 1970s, however, that resistance had been broadest and deepest in Poland. The SED did what it could to squash internal dissent and was not afraid to stoke anti-Polish resentment. In the GDR, however, there was great recognition of the independent trade union *Solidarność*, which made the communist regime waver for the first time through civil resistance. Still more important than this historic bond was the need to validate permanent-

ly the German-Polish border along the Oder and Neisse Rivers. The *Volkskammer* reinforced this unconditionally:

In particular, the Polish people should know that its right to live in secure borders will not be challenged by us Germans through territorial claims, either now or in the future. We reinforce the inviolability of the Oder-Neisse border to the Republic of Poland as the basis of the peaceful coexistence of our peoples in a common European house. A future pan-German parliament shall confirm this contractually.

The revolutions and changes in Central and Eastern Europe put many old and new questions on the agenda. It had to be the goal of the Western states to take the initiative after the tumultuous upheaval of fall 1989. The United States had a lot riding on this game—no less than its future role in Europe. As 1990 dawned it was clear that German reunification would come. When and how were still open questions. Of central significance for the United States was NATO membership of united Germany. This was the most important instrument of the leadership role of the United States in Europe. German withdrawal from the Alliance would have greatly reduced the significance of NATO and essentially restricted the influence of the United States in Europe. Thus, President Bush, out of his own national interest, supported Helmut Kohl's concept of as rapid a unification as possible under Article 23 (with the GDR subsumed into the FRG)—naturally under particular conditions.

When after the first free election in the GDR on April 12, 1990 I was selected as Foreign Minister, important international constellations had already been defined. The 2+4 mechanism among the two German states and the four World War II allies had been devised and agreed upon. Hans-Dietrich Genscher described the background to me during a visit to his home immediately after my selection. In fall 1989 in my programmatic lecture for the establishment of the Social Democratic Party in the GDR (SDP), I had still been advocating for a peace treaty to solve the German question. Now, Genscher made clear why such terminology and any such procedures must absolutely be avoided: just fifty years after the end of the war, the Federal Republic's democratic history and its long-term partnership in Western Europe in NATO and the EC could not be abandoned. Germany could not allow itself

to become the mere object of four-power talks or even that of a large peace conference. Instead, the Federal Republic had to be regarded as an equal partner among the democracies of the West. Last but not least, it was important to prevent more than fifty former enemies from wanting to have a say over German unification or make new demands for reparations. He emphasized the necessity of having both German states be equal negotiating partners whose agreement was the prerequisite for any settlement. This argumentation illuminated for me that I completely shared these intentions. Furthermore, I felt that we could indicate with pride that we had fought for democracy in the GDR itself. We East Germans had learned from our history. We wanted to help shape self-confidently the design not just of German unity, but also Europe's future.

This urge to shape the future architecture, infused as it was by a strong sense of moral legitimation, nevertheless faced some daunting realities. This became clear to me only little by little. The goal of the freely elected GDR government was the establishment of German unity. Our task was to prepare and execute the voluntary self-dissolution of the GDR into the Federal Republic of Germany, which would offer the legal frame for a united Germany. This alone rendered clear the uneven influence each German state would be able to exercise in the process, regardless of any difference in political experience among the actors involved.

My acceptance into the foreign minister's circle was very friendly. Despite some contrary statements, people did not—and essentially did not want to—count on having a real actor step onto the playing field in the form of the truly democratic GDR. This was abundantly clear when, after the Ottawa agreements about the 2+4 mechanism in February 1990, none of the countries concerned waited until there were democratic elections and thus legitimate representatives of the GDR. The first official meetings of the 2+4 talks, the task of which was to prepare the first meeting on the foreign ministers' level, took place four days *before* the first free selection of the *Volkskammer* in the GDR!

Despite these conceivably poor prerequisites for a truly independent role in the negotiations, we developed our own concepts. The most important positions had already been agreed upon in the coalition

agreements. In the following, I will restrict myself to questions relating to the 2+4 talks.

First, we wanted to embed the process of German unification not just in the process of European unification—which was also the goal of the Federal Republic’s government—but to design it so that it could also be a catalyst for this. Therefore, with respect to the essentially same goals, our approach to the negotiations was quite different from the very beginning. The Western states, including the Federal Republic, wanted first and foremost the Soviet Union to agree to German unification and sovereignty, dissolution of four power rights, and unified Germany’s membership in NATO. Otherwise, they wanted to regulate the future as little as possible. According to this perspective, all other options should be kept open, for it was clear where the center of power in Europe would be in the future—namely in the West. We, by contrast, believed it was important to determine central questions not just of German, but also of European unity and development, at least in rudimentary fashion. We believed there should be transitional rules with respect to various questions in order to keep the process in flux for the future and at least to specify its direction. Precisely such transitional rules were rejected categorically by the West for the reasons mentioned above and, in retrospect, for very justified reasons.

Second, we hoped that after the end of the confrontation of the two blocs in the Cold War that it would be possible to overcome the two camps step by step. Therefore, we strove for drastic disarmament steps and transitional rules for pan-European security structures. In this process we believed the CSCE should have played a central role, which is why we sought ways to strengthen it. We took up a Polish proposal and worked jointly with Warsaw and Prague to develop an initiative for the enhancement and institutionalization of the CSCE (the so-called Tri-lateral Initiative). At the beginning of March 1990, that is, still before the GDR’s free election, I visited Washington for the first time with my undersecretary-to-be Hans Misselwitz and formally to a certain extent in parallel with SPD members of the Bundestag Dietrich Stobbe and Horst Ehmke. During this trip, it became clear to me that a united Germany, at least for a transition period, would have to be a member of NATO. However, we only wanted to agree to such a membership if NATO would also be prepared to make the necessary changes with

respect to its function and strategies (forward defense, flexible response and first use of nuclear weapons).

Third, according to our understanding, the recovery of German sovereignty was supposed to go hand-in-hand with sovereign German declarations, taken freely and without pressure, that united Germany would adhere to certain self-restrictions intended to contribute to a European framework for peace. These included, for example, the relinquishment not just of the manufacturing, possession, and control, but also of the stationing of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons. We would have preferred to have this restriction set down in the Unification Treaty or in the Basic Law. We also wanted to provide an impetus for conventional disarmament and reduction of troop strengths in Europe. The troop strength of unified Germany should be reduced radically. When in June at the 2+4 Foreign Ministers' Conference in Berlin I proposed reducing the number of German troops to 300,000 (or as a compromise to 380,000), this was rejected vehemently by the Western negotiation partners as a "singularization of Germany." A little later, however, this happened anyway at Kohl and Gorbachev's Caucasus summit, even without making reference to my proposal: at the end of August 1990, both German states declared before the Vienna Disarmament Conference of the CFE Treaty that unified Germany would limit its troops to 370,000 men. This declaration became part of the 2+4 treaty.

Fourth, as described above, we felt deeply connected to our Eastern neighbors, who had suffered with us under dictatorship and who had also freed themselves from it. This also included the peoples of the Soviet Union, for they had also started down the path of democratization, which had to be much rockier for them than for us because there was no democratic tradition there. However, not just because of this moral and historic bond, but also especially for basic political reasons, it seemed indispensable to us to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union that it could bear.

Any sense that the Soviet Union agreed to terms of German unification due to momentary weakness could leave a feeling there that they actually did lose the Second World War. This could prove to be a lingering factor of insecurity for the Europe of the future. We wanted to avoid a "Versailles" for the Soviet Union. From our point of view,

not just the agreement itself, but real, appropriate consideration of the Soviet Union's interests was in the interest not just of Germany, but of all of Europe. This is why it was important to us that even after Soviet troop withdrawal from Germany the Soviet Union needed to remain permanently bound to Europe—politically, culturally, economically and in terms of security policy. Among other things, it was a problem for the Soviet Union that it would withdraw its troops completely after unification, while not a lot would change for the Western allies.

In order to treat all four allies equally in at least one respect—something that was of great psychological value to the Soviet Union—I proposed at the second 2+4 Foreign Ministers' Conference in Berlin in June 1990 that all four victorious powers leave Berlin as soon as possible. That wouldn't have cost anything from a security policy point of view, but it would have been an important symbol of the equal treatment of the four allies for the Soviet Union. Of course, such a proposal was believed to be completely impossible at that time, even though it has long since been implemented.

Fifth, for us the recognition of Poland's western border was a high priority. It had to be recognized as quickly and easily as possible, in binding fashion under international law and permanently. Only this way could we expect our neighbors to greet German unification and dispel the more or less latent fears of the Polish people. From our point of view, this recognition should have occurred voluntarily. We believed that any impression that we Germans had been forced to do this would be damaging. Nobody was supposed to have to tell us where Germany lies! Germany could prove its maturity by freely recognizing its neighbors' territorial integrity.

We therefore strove for a border treaty that was supposed to confirm in binding fashion according to international law the existing German-Polish border as it was described in 1950 in the Görlitz Treaty between the GDR and Poland and in 1972 in the Warsaw Pact between the Federal Republic and Poland. In the process, we joined with a proposal by Polish Prime Minister Mazowiecki, for we wanted to do everything to avoid doubts and insecurities on the part of the Poles about German behavior. Accordingly, we believed that a treaty between the two German states and Poland should be negotiated and signed immediately after unification by the unified German and Polish gov-

ernments and ratified by both parliaments. Helmut Kohl vehemently resisted this, so that the talks between the two German states and Poland fizzled out after a brief time.

I believed that the phrase used frequently by Helmut Kohl and Wolfgang Schäuble—that the recognition of the border was the “price of reunification”—was extremely problematic. Anyone who employed such characterizations could not have been surprised when fears arose within neighboring countries that Germany—as soon as unity had been achieved—could have adopted very different positions on the border or on other issues. Nonetheless, in contrast to Willy Brandt, who in 1970 risked a great deal politically when he initiated a dramatic process of reconciliation with Poland and signed the Warsaw Treaty, Helmut Kohl was not prepared to risk losing any votes—even though it was clear he would decisively win the election. Instead, he left Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist Prime Minister of Poland, high and dry even though Mazowiecki urgently needed a success with regard to the border issue.

From our point of view, the territories had been lost as a consequence of the criminal war by Nazi Germany. United Germany should recognize it permanently.

The French in particular tried to calm the Poles and carefully influence Helmut Kohl. Later, the Federal Republic agreed to an identical declaration of the German *Bundestag* and the *Volkskammer* in which the existence of the German-Polish border was guaranteed. Soon after that, a solution acceptable to all sides could be found at the July 1990 2+4 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Paris.

An important prerequisite for this was our proposal to differentiate between a treaty regulating the German-Polish border and a second treaty intended to cover other areas of bilateral cooperation. Originally, neither Poland nor the government of the Federal Republic wanted to accept our proposal, however each for different reasons. Poland wanted to clarify all future questions related to German unity that affected it, not just the border question. The government of the Federal Republic, in contrast, was aware that such an extensive treaty would require a lot of time. This was fine, since it was playing for time due to the December *Bundestag* elections. Thus, in Paris in July 1990 it was agreed that the border treaty should be signed immediately after unification, and

that a bilateral treaty covering other aspects of the bilateral relationship would follow later.

In November 1990, however—following unification on October 3—Helmut Kohl walked back from this sequencing, declaring that Germany would only ratify a border treaty with Poland together with the bilateral treaty. This announcement, three weeks before the federal elections, was a signal to the expellee organizations that they could include their claims against Poland in the negotiations on the bilateral treaty. This was pure electoral politics, bought by abdicating solidarity with Poland. This appalled me at the time.

The German–Polish Border Treaty was signed on November 14, 1990 in Warsaw, ratified by the Polish *Sejm* on November 26, 1991 and the German *Bundestag* on December 16, 1991,⁵ and entered into force on January 16, 1992. The bilateral Treaty of Good Neighborship and Friendly Cooperation was signed between Poland and Germany on June 17, 1991.

The intent of the Western powers to limit the 2+4 process to a few points of negotiation so as to facilitate quick agreement helped to make prompt German unification possible. It was a great gain for Germany and its European neighbors. Moreover, the “Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany” of September 12, 1990 did not just clear the path for German unity, it also influenced the wording of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, signed by the member states of the CSCE in November 1990. Anyone who reads these texts today can still sense something of the vision of a new Europe founded on common values that motivated us and many people all across Europe at that time.

Because unification proceeded under Article 23 of the Federal Republic’s Basic Law, the GDR also automatically and without negotiations became a member of the European Community (EC). From our point of view, the prospect of EC membership was also necessary for the states of East Central Europe. In those days, and in fact for many years following, Western discourse about “Europe” tended to be reduced to considerations affecting only the members of the European Community (later the European Union). We, by contrast, wanted to develop a pan-European perspective and make clear that a stable Europe of the future could only be created with the integration of these

East Central European states and with a binding cooperation with the Soviet Union. Thus, the coalition treaty of the Grand Coalition in the GDR of April 12, 1990 stated that “The GDR wants to develop and deepen its special connection to the people of Eastern Europe, economically, politically, and culturally. It espouses a quick, stepwise expansion of the European Community.” For me, these sentences were a mandate and a legacy that inspired me to advocate for the membership of Poland and the other new democracies into the EU and NATO. I joined the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in 1991 and led the German delegation there from 1998-2006.

At the beginning of the 2000s, there was an intensive debate about NATO membership for the three Baltic states. It was not just the German government that hesitated since it feared Russian resistance. In 2001, I organized a statement by European parliamentarians that advocated for including the Baltic states since it was precisely these newly-independent states that urgently needed this solidarity and assurance. We sent this statement to the U.S. Senate, which at that time had not stated a clear position. In my view, we Germans bore special responsibility with respect to this question, given German history, particularly the Hitler-Stalin pact.

Overall, the democratic GDR had little maneuvering room in foreign policy. The reasons for this were many and varied. Certainly, we made some mistakes due to our own shortcomings and inexperience. The lack of unity within our own government did not help. For me, the brief spell as Foreign Minister was my “apprenticeship” as a politician. The most important reason however, was that the East German people voted to accede to the Federal Republic of Germany. The East German people wanted unification quickly. They were not interested in the negotiations that were being conducted on their behalf. They did not see their importance and viewed them as delaying unification. Only later, after unification, did the “mistakes of unification” become a topic of debate.

In February 1990, with a view to the increasingly clear inability of Hans Modrow’s communist GDR government to govern, Condoleezza Rice and Philip Zelikow characterized the GDR in February 1990 as “simply a mutating corpse.”⁶ Yet that was no justification for starting the first official round of 2+4 talks before free elections could be held

and a democratically legitimized GDR government could be formed. In essence this was an act of disrespect with regard to the new government even before it could develop a position. Efforts by the Western partners to decide things before there was even a legitimate GDR negotiating partner were highly questionable. We were not being treated any better than we had been under the communist government. The Western partners never considered that the new GDR government would become an equal partner in the negotiations on German unity.

In retrospect, I believe that the 2+4 Treaty was the best path to resolve the German question and achieve German unity. It also created the central basic principles for future European development. In contrast, both the German-German unity treaty and the withdrawal agreement with the USSR for its troops were full of errors and led to many difficult problems.

Even if I believe in hindsight that it was correct not to incorporate into the 2+4 negotiations topics that I wanted to put on the agenda—such as the question of nuclear weapons and their proliferation as well as German responsibility for pan-European security—it is problematic that these topics were sorely neglected in subsequent years, particularly in light of German history. It is no wonder, for instance, that questions about reparations in Greece and Poland have become a current topic. In 2015, German President Joachim Gauck reminded people about the more than three million Soviet prisoners of war who had previously been overlooked completely in German “memory culture.” Only recently did Germany’s Grand Coalition decide to create a place that tells the story of Germany’s war of destruction in the East and that is dedicated to the memory of its victims. Debate continues on this issue as well.

The Path to German Unity as the Process of East German Self-Determination

Even 30 years later we Germans are still far from having a common view of the process of German unity, or even an understanding of the various perspectives that shaped it. Official anniversary events make this clear time and again. For most (West) Germans, Helmut Kohl’s

image shapes German unity, as if it were his work alone. With all due respect to his important role, this is simply not the case.

For most Germans, the 15 months from summer 1989 to October 3, 1990 have become one event. But I believe that for an appropriate understanding of this time, it is important to distinguish between three important periods.

The first was the culmination of the crisis in summer 1989, amplified by the East German exodus and the opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border; the fall of the dictatorship in the fall 1989 revolution; and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this phase, the political action and leadership of the new opposition groups and organizations and the powerful pressure on the streets and in the squares produced a symbiotic dynamic that swept the regime from power.

The second phase took place between November 1989 and March 1990. It was the time when the prospect of free elections became real, when opposition groups met with the government of Hans Modrow to address popular concerns and pave the way for elections, and the building pressure that pointed the way to German unity.

The third phase took place between March and October 1990, beginning with the free elections in the GDR on March 18, the decision of the elected *Völkammer* that the GDR would accede to the Federal Republic of Germany according to Article 23 of the Federal Republic's Basic Law, and the internal and external negotiations on German unification, leading to the currency union on July 1 and the subsequent unification treaty and the 2+4 treaty.

These three phases had one common thread: the path to German unity was driven first and foremost by the actions of East Germans. The dictatorship in the GDR was brought down from the inside, not the outside. The East German people fought for free elections, which became a vote for unity. Accession to the Federal Republic was decided by the freely elected *Völkammer*. In short, East Germany's path to freedom led directly to German unity. Seen from this perspective, German unification was the self-determined path of the East Germans, who pursued this with their heads held high.

Therefore, I believe that it is not accurate to speak of a victory of the West over the East. It is even dangerous to do this. Anyone who speaks

like this is probably referring to the victory of freedom and democracy over the communist dictatorship that ruled Eastern Europe. Referring to this as the victory over the East is mistaken, for people who live there do not feel they were defeated. Throughout East Central Europe, including the GDR, the dictatorships were swept away by the peoples of the East, not the powers of the West. The end of the barriers separating the German people and Europeans East and West was a victory of the people who advocated for freedom and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Of course, the West created basic conditions that were an important prerequisite for this transformation: among others, the successful and magnetic model of the European Community; freedom and democracy; prosperity and peaceful accommodation of various national interests; and the clear position of NATO, which relied simultaneously on deterrence and dialogue. The West was not inactive. On its own, however, it could not bring down the Soviet system without endangering peace. That was the problem. When suppression occurred in 1953 in East Germany, people looked on helplessly—as they did in Hungary in 1956, in East Germany again in 1961, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1981. The ultimate breakthrough, the freeing from dictatorship, had to come from within these countries themselves. And just that happened in 1989.

Through these years the Federal Republic could only react and try to influence these dynamics by facilitating people-to-people contacts and influencing East German actors. For the key lay in the GDR. When the revolution finally occurred in the East, it was then incumbent upon the West to bring the ship of German unity into harbor without great shocks, for this is precisely what the East Germans were not in a position to do. This included securing Four Power agreement to unity through the 2+4 talks, ensuring that all parts of a united Germany were included in the EC and in NATO, and reaching broader agreements with the Soviet Union and other European neighbors. This is where I acknowledge the special contribution of Helmut Kohl.

The many-layered nature of the decision-making process has not yet been appropriately researched nor is it present in the public consciousness. However, a differentiated view of this history is important because it is associated with our self-image today.

Legacies

We originally entered the negotiations on German unity intent on forging a unified Germany that would not simply be an expanded Federal Republic in the sense of a “West Germany writ large,” but a new joint state in which East Germans would not have to adopt everything that had grown up in West Germany. Some reformers in the West shared this hope. They showered us with reform proposals that we were supposed to incorporate into the negotiations even though they had failed time and again in the West. We were not even in a position to read everything that came across the table! In the end, however, we were unsuccessful. German unity was an acquisition, not a merger. This has led to great disappointments.

The German-German treaty on the internal aspects of unification became a tour de force of the administration of the Federal Republic. It was the generously designed attempt to adapt the completely different social relationships in the GDR to the German Federal legal system so that it would cause as little pain as possible in the East, but also not make changes unless absolutely necessary. As Wolfgang Schäuble, the lead Western negotiator of the internal aspects of unification admitted, “the concern now is unity and not with this opportunity to change anything for the Federal Republic.”⁷

One important consequence of this approach is the lingering sense among large parts of the population in eastern Germany that their concerns and contributions were—and are—not really taken seriously. Implementation of unification has also been problematic. Despite massive economic transfers, in many respects the eastern *Länder* represent Germany’s *Mezzogiorno*—a region where dim economic prospects are exacerbated by outward migration. 30 years later, east Germans largely feel that their contributions are inadequately recognized. They have yet to arrive in unified Germany.

For some years, the reconstituted communist party, the PDS, reaped the political benefits from this disillusionment. Today, the protest vote is going to the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Germany’s various grand coalitions have failed to devote the necessary attention to the problems of eastern Germany. Even though Chancellor Angela

Merkel and former President Joachim Gauck are each east German, they did not act on their special identity.

Nobody today denies that mistakes were made. To what extent alternatives at the time could have offered a better approach to the problems, however, is something that is still assessed very differently today.

One important example, which I still believe today was a big mistake, were decisions made regarding the constitution. Even in the constitution commission of the round table and in the *Volkskammer* there was considerable controversy around the nature of unified Germany's constitution. However, the common goal was that unified Germany should provide itself with a new constitution based on the Basic Law. The West-SPD supported this explicitly. In March 1990, in a *Der Spiegel* conversation with Wolfgang Schäuble, I mentioned that for us the concern was not to change so very much about the Basic Law, but rather that all Germans should create a constitution. I still believe today that even if this were a largely symbolic move, it would have strengthened the identification of East Germans with unified Germany as their state and common weal. But that too was rejected. What remained was the constitution commission of 1991-1994, a joint project between the *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat*, the two houses of the German Parliament, which produced meager results.

Thirty years after the Peaceful Revolution and German unity, Germans east and west each face the task of recontextualizing their individual histories and experiences. Most people socialized in the West regarded the East as a "special zone," and in their eyes, German history took place in the West. This overlooks the fact that much of German history in the 20th century was that of a divided postwar country of two different states. It cannot be understood if one fails to examine both halves and their intense relationship.

Thirty years on, the Germans are the people in Europe who know themselves the least. A national conversation is urgently required.

Notes

1. See the transcription of Gorbachev's address at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116224.pdf?v=373893a00d59186510e13c0cc7b57141>.

2. *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, Independent Commission on International Development Issues, chaired by Willy Brandt, 1980.

3. *Common Security: A Programme for Disarmament*, Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, chaired by Olof Palme, 1982.

4. *Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, 1987.

5. In the ratification process in the Bundestag, 13 deputies of the CDU/CSU faction, among them the leader of the expellees, Erika Steinbach, dissented from approval of the border treaty.

6. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Sternstunde der Diplomatie* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 1997), p. 214.

7. Wolfgang Schäuble, *Der Vertrag: Wie ich über die deutsche Einheit verhandelte* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1991), p. 156.

