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E-NOTES

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THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL, THE POWER OF INDIVIDUALS, AND THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF HISTORY

By Ronald J. Granieri



On Sunday, April 7, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia will sponsor “Fall of the Berlin Wall,” a Kimmel Center concert conducted by Ignat Solzhenitsyn. In honor of that event, we asked FPRI’s Ron Granieri, a historian of modern Germany, to offer reflections on the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. Granieri is Executive Director of FPRI’s Center for the Study of America and the West and host of FPRI’s monthly interactive program “Geopolitics with Granieri.”

German unification was one of the most dramatic developments in contemporary history, as well as one of the most unexpected. After decades during which the press and public measured political wisdom according to how well leaders managed the apparently permanent realities of German and European division, leaders in 1989 had to improvise responses to the literal collapse of the most concrete of those realities in Berlin. As much as German politicians had claimed for years to be hoping for this day, none had actual plans ready. Into this potentially dangerous vacuum stepped a most unlikely improviser. Helmut Kohl was a reasonably successful party leader of enormous bulk and moderate political gifts, generally underestimated even by his political allies and known neither for creativity nor dynamism. To the surprise of all, he proved remarkably adept at managing the international and domestic complications of 1989. Within thirteen months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he rode successful reunification negotiations to a landslide victory in the first all-German democratic elections since 1932. Even if many of his decisions during those months can be (and have been) questioned, his place in history is assured.

Kohl’s story provides but one of many crucial insights into how the story of German reunification displays both the limits of realism and the unpredictability of history. That unpredictability reminds us of the role that individuals can still play in the modern world, even in the face of enormous complexity. For it was the combined actions of individuals, neither beginning nor ending with Kohl, who changed the world in 1989, and all students of international affairs can profit from reexamining that dramatic story.

To appreciate just how important those individual actions could be, one has to remember the state of the world (and of most thinking about the world) in the 1980s. After decades of Cold War, the US-Soviet rivalry still shaped most global conceptions, on issues ranging from economic development to the world chess championships, not to mention the Olympics. Even as progressives decried the focus on East-West rivalry and advocated more attention to North-South issues of economic development, conventional wisdom dictated that intelligent people assume the existence of Eastern and Western blocs for as far as the eye could see. The sense that this rivalry was permanent, and required careful management rather than bold transformations, was pervasive. Indeed, that attitude was so widespread that when commentators spoke of the End of the Cold War at all, they imagined a world in which the United States and the Soviet Union, with their associated allies, still coexisted, though at a reduced level of tension, allowing the allegedly inevitable process of convergence to make their systems look as much like each other as possible. No one imagined one side would disappear. That would have been dangerously unrealistic.

Nowhere were these assumptions more obvious than in Berlin. Although actual defenders of the “anti-Fascist protection barrier” were few outside of the upper leadership of East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), the world had come to accept the presence of the Berlin Wall as the price to be paid for stability and security in Central Europe. President Ronald Reagan had declared “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” when he spoke before the Brandenburg Gate in 1987, but his words were greeted at the time as the tired echo of anachronistic sentiments. No one really expected it to happen—perhaps not even Reagan himself, who by that time was committed to negotiating arms control treaties with the Soviets based on his positive assessment of his new partner, Mikhail Gorbachev. If anything, informed observers assumed that Gorbachev’s policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* would stabilize the Soviet Union, making the situation even more permanent. That was, after all, why Reagan felt he had to ask Gorbachev to tear down the wall; no one else had the power to do it.

By 1988, the academic world, entranced by the brilliant writing and daring prognostications of Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, as well as by Gorbachev’s ponderous yet oddly optimistic *Perestroika*, was more concerned about whether the United States would collapse under the pressure of “Imperial Overstretch” than they were willing to speculate about the collapse of communism.¹ The milestones of those years reinforced that impression. The Washington Treaty (INF Treaty) that abolished intermediate range nuclear missiles capped the Great Rapprochement between Reagan and Gorbachev, celebrated at the time as the end of the Cold War. When Reagan visited the USSR in 1988, shaking hands and kissing babies in Red Square, he dismissed his own rhetoric of the “evil empire” as the “product of another time.”

By 1989, Europe was in a strange position. Strong awareness that things might be changing in places such as the Soviet Union and Poland mixed with a lack of any clear sense of where they were going. Gorbachev had become an international celebrity. His visit to Bonn in June 1989 was the high point, as he thrilled wildly cheering crowds with his rhetoric of a “common European home.” The Cold War might be ending, but communism was here to stay. Events on the other side of the world reinforced the sense of a permanent status quo, Chinese tanks in Tiananmen Square offering proof that when push came to shove communist regimes would shove back especially hard against reform.

Ironically, the revolutions of 1989 came precisely at a time when the idea of German reunification was about as far from anyone’s mind as it had ever been. Gorbachev himself said it was “not on the agenda of History.” Helmut Kohl and the center-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) had criticized the détente oriented Ostpolitik of the previous Social Democratic governments through the 1970s. But once they returned to power in 1982, Kohl and the CDU/CSU pursued continuity in Ostpolitik, including seeking a modus vivendi with the German Democratic Republic. Partly this was due to the fact that Hans-Dietrich Genscher of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which had changed partners to bring Kohl to power, remained foreign minister, the job he had held since 1974. It also reflected the realist foreign policy consensus, which preferred the stability provided by division to the frightening uncertainties of unity.

Officially, the West Germans continued to avoid formal legal recognition of German division, and Kohl himself was careful to maintain the rhetorical connection to reunification. At the same time, his government helped stabilize the regime in East Berlin. When currency shortages raised fears of a major collapse, the Kohl government arranged for billions of marks in bank credits. The Western representative in those negotiations was one of the Federal Republic’s premier Cold Warriors, Kohl’s friendly rival Franz-Josef Strauss of the CSU. Strauss claimed then and after that the goal was to undermine the East German regime by exposing its economic weakness, but his willingness to help the regime avoid catastrophe showed that the Germans had learned to live with division. In September 1987, SED Chief Erich Honecker visited West Germany and received a greeting worthy of a visiting head of state, a sure sign of normalization.

His success in receiving such respectful treatment led Honecker to his most famous pronouncement, in January

¹ Not FPRI, though. In 1987 FPRI convened a three-day conference in New York City on the question “Will the Communist Regimes Survive?” Covered extensively in the news media at the time, the conference featured 36 speakers—all dissidents or exiles from 12 communist countries. According to FPRI’s then-deputy director Alan Luxenberg, the vibrancy of the cross-national ties of the dissidents and exiles was readily apparent. “Freedom was in the air,” he said. Alas, FPRI may have been farsighted, but it was not terribly efficient at that time: the volume of conference papers was not published until 1991—after communism collapsed. See Vladimir Tismaneanu and Judith Shapiro, eds. *Debates on the Future of Communism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

1989. Confronting the question of whether the Berlin Wall should remain standing, he declared, "The Wall will be standing in 50 and even in 100 years, if the reasons for it are not yet removed."

Even as he said this, and as he resisted the new ideas coming from Moscow, however, the pressure for reform inspired by Gorbachev was encouraging changes in Poland and Hungary. When the Hungarians opened their border to Austria that summer, their reforms in turn spilled over into the GDR. East Germans hoping to evade the border restrictions chose to visit Hungary and escape to the West. Honecker's efforts to close off that escape route led hundreds of despairing East Germans to flood the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw, demanding exit visas.

By this point the people of East Germany had emerged onto the historical stage at last. First in the small groups crossing the Hungarian border, then the larger crowds flooding the embassies, and finally in the throngs marching through the streets of Berlin and Dresden and Leipzig, their simple yet powerful declaration "We are the people!" shook the foundations of the regime.

The first reactions of Western policymakers, however, were halting. Though many made speeches endorsing human rights, most politicians were more afraid of change than willing to see an opportunity. Genscher, for example, was not sure what to do about all the East Germans crowding the Embassies in Prague and Budapest. Only after long negotiations did both sides agree to allow the occupiers to head west in sealed trains. Opposition politicians were even more ambivalent, as they had moved further and further to the Left in the 1980s. In June 1989, SPD Minister President of Lower Saxony Gerhard Schröder famously remarked: "After forty years of the Federal Republic we should not lie to a new generation in Germany about the chances of reunification. There are none." In late July, Joschka Fischer of the Greens, future Foreign Minister, went one better, dismissing the demand for reunification as "a dangerous illusion" and called for removing the call for reunification from the preamble of West Germany's Basic Law. Even later that fall, Fischer said "Forget about reunification; we should shut up about that for the next twenty years."

The people of East Germany, however, decided not to shut up, but to speak out. As October, which saw anti-government protests during the official celebrations of the GDR's Fortieth Anniversary, turned to November, the pressure from the people had become unbearable for the East German regime. Warned by Gorbachev that "history punishes those who change too late," the SED tried to stave off its end by jettisoning Honecker and offering a new reformist face in Egon Krenz. Krenz deserves credit for rejecting the possibility of using force against the protesters (what the security forces called, with sinister subtlety, the "Chinese solution"). But Krenz could not keep up with a population whose hunger for reform grew with the eating. When the SED Politburo tried to rush out an announcement easing the visa requirements for foreign travel, the garbled press conference inspired crowds to rush to the center of Berlin and demand the Wall be opened up immediately. As the befuddled border guards acquiesced, the Wall designed to last another fifty or a hundred years had seen its last day.

Once the wall fell, reunification was still only a hazy possibility. Many East German dissidents and western intellectuals still hoped for a "Third Way" between Soviet communism and western capitalism. This reflected of course an ideological split between those on the left who had prided themselves on leaving nationalism behind and those on the right who had been rhetorically committed to the nation for so long. But the split was generational as well. When younger social democrats such as Gerhard Schröder or Oskar Lafontaine expressed worries that the costs outweighed the benefits of national unity, the grand old man of their party Willy Brandt, simply declared, "That which belongs together will grow together."

Even as government agencies proved to be unprepared for the events, Kohl seized the opportunity to back up a lifetime of rhetoric with decisive action.

On November 28, 1989, he gave a speech offering a ten-point plan for German unification, beginning with easing travel restrictions, and ending with reunification within a unifying Europe. Choosing boldness over drift, Kohl's plan attracted crucial support from Washington. His European allies, especially France, Britain, and Italy, were publicly more reserved, but President George Bush lined up behind Kohl, and helped in talks with Gorbachev.

Kohl's plan also resonated with the people in East Germany. Uninterested in serving as subjects of another social experiment, they began to agitate for unification, or forced the issue by moving to the West themselves. Only the

promise of ultimate reunification could keep the East Germans at home. “We are the people” became “We are one people.” Free elections in East Germany on March 18, 1990 showed where things were going. The CDU and its allies, Kohl’s parties, won a strong mandate. The stage was set for reunification, which Kohl and Bush negotiated with the Soviets. Careful negotiations led to the German-German Financial Treaty on May 18, which went into effect on July 1, making the Deutschmark the common currency of the two German states. On the broader international stage, negotiations on the Two Plus Four treaty, including the two German states and the four occupying powers, (a formula initially suggested by State Department official and future FPRI President Harvey Sicherman) proceeded apace. German offers of financial assistance helped sweep away remaining Soviet reservations. The conclusion of the Treaty on September 12 led to official unity on October 3, 1990.

It had all happened very fast, faster even than the protesters in the streets had expected. The hollowness of the SED regime and its utter lack of legitimacy certainly played a role. Most important was Kohl’s surprising willingness to press ahead, confident both that Washington was behind him and that Gorbachev could be convinced through a combination of political pressure and economic inducement to agree. Later on, he would be criticized for moving too fast, and for downplaying the potential costs as he predicted “blooming landscapes” in the former East. Much Western intelligence on the GDR proved incorrect; East Germany was not as prosperous and strong as their propaganda had indicated. There was also a great deal of wishful thinking about the challenges of reuniting a country after four decades of division. Consequently, Germans suffered from a long economic and social hangover that continues to bedevil German politics and society. Kohl rode the euphoria of reunification to a big victory in 1990 elections, as the SPD leadership under Oskar Lafontaine was torn by ambivalence over reunification and its costs. In 1994, Kohl was re-elected, but with a much smaller majority as the costs of reunification became clearer. In 1998 he suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the new generation represented by Schröder and Fischer. But by then there was no going back.

Bismarck has famously been quoted as saying, “A statesman cannot create anything himself. He must wait and listen until he hears the steps of God sounding through events; then leap up and grasp the hem of his garment.” Some opportunities appear only once, and for a very brief time. German unity was such an opportunity. Kohl represented a generation that considered reunification a natural goal, but that generation was on its way out by 1989. Considering further what happened in the Soviet Union, especially the intense backlash culminating in the 1991 coup attempt, one sees that it was good that Kohl had moved so quickly, because the window of opportunity was very small. What was possible in 1990 had been unthinkable in early 1989, and would have been unthinkable again by the summer of 1991.

German unification should humble all who profess to be able to predict the course of history, and also demonstrates the limitations of a realism that attempts to reduce international and domestic politics to the sum of external structures. Structures may indeed strongly shape reality, but they alone are not enough. It takes people to give them meaning. The Cold War did not end because the superpowers said so. Or rather, what the superpowers meant by the end of the Cold War would have left the Berlin Wall standing, and a great many other walls besides. It took people with imagination to grasp the possibilities, not simply to end, but to transcend the Cold War.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism in Europe is a story full of fascinating characters. They include a man in Rome, born in Cracow with a kindly smile and an iron will; another in Moscow who risked the fate of an empire, and lost, to win a victory for humanity; two men in Washington, mocked as an “amiable dunce” and a “wimp,” who showed both skill and empathy in dealing with friends old and new; and the ponderous, slow-talking man in Bonn who grasped the opportunity to unite his divided nation.

But it is not enough to focus only on the powerful. It was the people in their broadest sense that made this history possible, often in the face of criticism from experts who clucked and told them that they needed to accept the permanence of concrete realities. They are the thousands of individuals who marched together for freedom in Leipzig, Dresden, East Berlin, and other German cities and towns, as well as thousands more in Prague, Warsaw, Vilnius, Kiev, and even Moscow. We do not know their names, but we know what they accomplished. By tearing down a hateful monument to dictatorship, they helped build a better world.