

# THE UNIFICATION OF GERMANY IN 1989-1990 AND THE WRITING OF GERMAN HISTORY

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It is in two respects that the unification of Germany in 1989-1990 presents a challenge to those writing the history of Germany: First, the events of 1989-1990 deserve careful analysis, circumspect interpretation, and emphatic description. When did the loyalty of those supporting the communist regime in the GDR begin to waver? Exactly when did the economy in the part of Germany occupied by the Soviets in 1945 begin to stagnate? What was the role of the major ecological damages inflicted in the region between the Elbe and the Oder rivers in the process of economic stagnation and disappearing loyalty? In 1989 and 1990, what decisions were made in Moscow, and what was the role of the ruling SED in East Berlin? There are a host of questions which have to be answered, and presently there are a number of historians and political scientists actively engaged in finding answers. The major obstacle they confront is a lack of sources: not that there are not plentiful materials about the events that took place from August 1989 to the summer of 1990; what is difficult, however, is to gain access to key documents, such as the protocols of the Central Committee of the SED in East Berlin, and there can be no doubt that a close look at these documents is necessary if one wants to reconstruct cause and effect, and if one wants to place responsibility on the shoulders of those who made crucial decisions, or who failed to do so.

The other challenge to historians writing German history is even more difficult to master: What happened in Germany in 1989-1990 has to be understood as a caesura in German history, a caesura of far-reaching importance, I should add, which should serve as an impulse to start discussing continuities and discontinuities in German history once more. In 1989, Werner Weidenfeld and Hartmut Zimmermann published a work which they called *Deutschland-Handbuch: Eine doppelte Bilanz 1949-1989* (Germany Handbook: A twofold account, or reckoning). The question we have to face, and discuss, is how these two times forty years of German history from 1949 until 1989, the forty years of the Federal Republic, and the forty years of the German Democratic Republic, can be brought into a meaningful relationship with the twenty times forty years of prior German history, if I may sum up German history from the Middle Ages until 1945 in this way. The discussion about this matter has hardly started. At the same time it is obvious that it is up to the historians to comprehend and to explain how German history from 1949 until 1989 may be connected with the earlier phases of German history encompassing both the older and the more recent past. This is what I want to address in the following remarks.

Let me begin with some observations about historiography. Some of the authors of the most widely used and influential accounts of German history cover their topic up to 1945 but not beyond. This is true, for example, for Hajo Holburn, for Gordon Craig, and also for the widely used German history series published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. There are two works which include the Immediate Post War Era. I am referring to Golo Mann's *Deutsche Geschichte* and to Karl Dietrich Erdmann's contribution to *Gebhardt's Handbuch*. Three works in German, but none so far in English, contain more comprehensive parts on the post-war time: *Deutsche Geschichte* published by Ullstein with the volume by Andreas Hillgruber describes German events up to 1972, the new

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edition of *Rassowa Handbuch der Deutschen Geschichte*, published in 1987, with a chapter by Peter Wulf brings the story up to 1982, and the *Deutsche Geschichte*, published by Siedler, with Adolfe Birke's volume, *Nation ohne Haus*, published in 1990, also covering the time up to the 1980's. All three of these series try to inform readers about the main events in post-1949 German history. At the same time, in these series no attempt is being made to relate post-1949 German history with pre-1945 German history which is being written, and presented, by other authors. What we are confronted with, therefore, is a compilation of single parts by specialists, but no synthesis; what we receive are perhaps too many facts, and not enough meaning.

Certainly, during the past years, a number of important books on post-1949 German history have been published. I mentioned the *Deutschland-Handbuch* by Weidenfeld and Zimmermann, and I should also refer to the volume *The Federal Republic of Germany at Forty*, edited by Peter H. Merkl, the *History of West Germany*, published in two volumes by Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, and the *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*, edited in five volumes by Narl Dietrich Bracher, Theodor Eschenburg, Joachim C. Fest, and Eberhard Jackel. All of these books deserve praise for their scholarship. What we look to them for in vain, or almost in vain, however, are paragraphs which tell us how pre-1945 German history influenced post-1949 German history, how these very different parts of German history were connected and how they can be linked in a meaningful way.

Not all these aspects of such a complex and complicated topic can be addressed in a brief presentation. Rather, I want to bring to your attention three aspects which should not be ignored when one tries to give meaning to the German past: first, the role of federalism, or regionalism; second, the meaning of the rule of law; third, coming to terms with myth-creation and memory-control by historians which includes the extent, and limits, of our knowledge of German history.

After the German Democratic Republic joined the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990, one of the first, and seemingly simplest procedures was the division of the former GDR into states. Without much controversy, five new states were created: Sachsen, Thuringen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Brandenburg, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and these five new states were added to the eleven states of the Federal Republic, giving the Germany of today a total of sixteen. Thus, in a matter of far-reaching political importance, namely in the question of federalism, the former GDR adapted to the model that had been created in the Federal Republic in 1949, where federalism had become one of the main pillars of post-1949 democracy.

Compared to developments in other European countries from the Middle Ages to the modern time, centralization came late in Germany. The Holy Roman Emperor possessed power as the sovereign of the Habsburg lands, and after the Reformation, some influence as the head of the Catholic party within the Empire. But, his powers with regard to the various members of the Empire were clearly limited by constitutional provisions such as the Capitulation of Election signed by Charles V in 1519.<sup>1</sup> The Second Empire created in 1870-1871 meant a step toward centralism, especially because of the overwhelming influence of Prussia within the unified German state, but it was not until the Weimar Constitution that the centralizing elements out-weighed the rights and powers of the member-states. After Hitler's seizure of power, and the Gleichschaltung that followed, the

<sup>1</sup> Herman Wellenreuther, ed., *German and American Constitutional Thought: Contexts, Interaction, and Historical Realities* (New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg, 1990) 25-98, 247-350.

path toward a more centralized form of government was completed, but only for a short twelve years. Unconditional surrender was followed by the dismemberment of the Third Reich; four zones of occupation were created which meant a more decided decentralization of Central Europe than at any time since 1870. After the decision was made to reunite the zones of occupation of the three Western powers, much of this decentralized structure was then embedded into the Basic Law of 1949, thus linking the Federal Republic of Germany, in this respect, with earlier periods of German history.

In the four decades since 1949, federalism has proved to be one of the impressive elements of post-war German democracy.<sup>2</sup> Despite some attempts to strengthen the federal authorities, since 1949, the role of the states has grown in significant ways. Most obvious is the development of a regional cultural identity, supported by a highly successful cultural policy of the various states. Regional dialect has been given more recognition, especially in literature and theater; regional customs are no longer considered an indication of backwardness and provincialism. Stuttgart, Munich, Hannover, Hamburg, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Cologne, and Frankfurt have become centers of the arts, and in most cases, regional pride served to support cultural progress and to provide political stability. Even in the field of economics, the single states within the Federal Republic developed their own policy with Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria leading the way.

In the period from 1870 until 1945, centralism and nationalism lead to demarcation vis-a-vis neighboring countries. After 1949, the cultural diversity of the regions in Western Germany also opened the door to closer contacts with the other countries of Europe: Schleswig-Holstein created ties with Denmark, Lower Saxony with the Netherlands, the Rhineland with Belgium, the Palatinate and Baden with France, Bavaria with Austria and Italy. Many of the contacts on the state level were supplemented by partnerships between cities and even between villages. The wish of post-war Germans to reach out extended far beyond that; exchanges of students with North America were created, also with Britain and France, and German tourists in many countries are proof of the German's attempt to overcome nationalistic limitations, as is the German contribution to the unification of Western Europe. Today, one could expand the title of Friedrich Meinecke's famous study, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* so that it signifies that the course of German history led from *Weltbürgertum* (Global Citizenship) to *Nationalstaat* (Nation-State) but then back to *Weltbürgertum*. In this sense, the states of the Federal Republic are more than just an effective way of organizing public affairs. Rather, they should be seen as safeguards against nationalism and centralization renewed, and as bridges that connect the peoples of Central Europe without claims of German hegemony.

Finally, in the political life of the Federal Republic, the states also formed viable counter-weights against the central government. Over the years, the Bundesrat has gained respect as a policy-making body. Within the parties, the Minister-präsidenten, or Landesfürsten, have no less influence than the national leadership. Characteristically, three of the six chancellors who rode to power in Bonn made their career as Ministerpräsidenten, that is governors, or as mayors of a city-state; first Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, governor of Baden-Württemberg, then Willy Brandt, the former mayor of Berlin and also Helmut Kohl, formerly governor of Rhineland-Pfalz. In the case of Konrad Adenauer, one would argue that it was his reputation as mayor of Cologne that qualified

<sup>2</sup> Donald P. Kommers, *The Constitutional Jurisprudence of the Federal Republic of Germany* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1989) 69-120.

him to become chancellor in the eyes of many, and the same is true for Helmut Schmidt, who gained national fame, not as a defense expert of the SPD in the Bundesthe in the 1950's, but as the Senator for Interior Affairs in Hamburg when dealing most effectively with a major flood-tide. If many Germans today want to retain Bonn as the capital of a united Germany, some of the same political sentiments play a role. As we know, Bonn not only signals continuity in German commitment to democracy, to the Western Alliance and to European Unification, but also Bonn seems to guarantee the continuation of federalism better than Berlin, the capital of Prussia-dominated Germany from 1870 until 1945.

If federalism is one of the pillars of post-war German democracy, the rule of law, the recognition of personal rights and liberties as laid down in the Basic Law, and the basic division of power between the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches of government are the other pillars.<sup>3</sup> Ever since Gustav Heinemann, federal president from 1969 until 1974, challenged German historians to describe the history of democratic traditions in Germany, research into the history of basic rights, demands by the people, and the role of the legal system in German history has been quite lively. At the same time, the more we came to a better understanding of democratic elements in the German past, the more we had also to recognize the influence of undemocratic, authoritarian traditions. In this sense, the division of Germany in two parts in 1949, the democratic west and the non-democratic east, seemed like an exemplification and continuation of older German history in which democracy had never been able to prevail on the national level for any length of time. On the other hand, looking back from the Federal Republic, one could see that the Basic Law rested on older democratic traditions, on lessons learned by the Germans from their past, much as this constitution also corresponded to the wishes of the Western Powers.

In the past three decades, German historians have published ample proof about the importance of Landstand, or diets, in many of the territories of the Holy Roman Empire, despite the fact that absolutism came to Germany earlier than nationalism. Pioneer work in this area was done by Dietrich Gerhard, who had to leave Germany in the 1930's but who returned in the 1950's and served as director of the Modern History section at the renowned Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen. In addition, German historians, some from the former East, most from the former West, have published new research on the Peasant's War, on Grund-und Freiheitsrechte in the early Modern period.<sup>4</sup> Research has been ongoing on the conception, formulation, and application of legal codes on German supporters of the French Revolution, on the German left in the 19th century, on the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Implications of the democratic thought have been derived from studies on the Catholic and socialist resistance against the authoritarian tendencies in Bismarck's rule, the opposition against German imperialism and militarism, the difficult early stages, the promising middle years, the tragic end of the Weimar Republic, and the resistance against National Socialism by Germans from all walks of life who risked, and very often lost, their lives in doing so.

Of course, there is also a long and strong anti-democratic tradition in Germany: disrespect for the rule of law, contempt for the rights and liberties of individuals, and the use of military power to suppress the people, to name some aspects of a history which discredited the Germans among the freedom-loving peoples of the world. But wherever,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 121-503.

<sup>4</sup> Gunther Birtsch, *Grundund freiheitsrechte von der standischen zur spatburgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987).

and whenever, there was despotism in Germany, we can find also representatives of "the other Germany," and it is their example, their ideas, and their sacrifices which gave substance, integrity, and forcefulness to the rule of law and to personal freedom in the Federal Republic. In fact, the Germans can look back to a tradition of non-conformism and dissent reaching from men like Menno Simons, the founding father of the Mennonites, and Hans Hut, the founder of the Hutterites, to the German opponents. Through the centuries since the Reformation, some of these people had to suffer exile, most notably, the Germans who were expelled.

From the time of the Reformation until post-war Germany, therefore, authoritarian traditions were confronted by the ideas of the "other Germany" which survived abroad if they were suppressed in Germany. German-American relations should be studied from this perspective: the Krefelders who sailed west on the Concord in 1683 were religious dissenters. In the course of the 18th, and into the 19th century, they were followed by many religious groups searching for a place of refuge. After the revolution of 1848, several thousands of those who had supported the upheaval came to these shores. After 1933, there is no part of American academic life which was not affected by German refugees, as the "muses had to flee Hitler."<sup>5</sup> Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, and many others proudly claimed: Germany, that is true German culture is where we are. In other words, if one wants to interpret the rule of law in German history, one has to include the history of emigration and exile.

After 1945, some of those exiled returned to East Germany, some to West Germany. In both instances, their contribution was quite remarkable. At the same time, the legacy of the "other Germany" was handled quite differently in East Germany than in West Germany. In the East it was used, or misused, for propaganda purposes and to legitimize the communist regime. By contrast, in the West, it took much longer for the role of "the other Germany in exile" to be recognized. In 1961, when Willy Brandt made his first bid as a candidate to become chancellor, it was used against him effectively that he had been in exile from 1933 to 1945. On the other hand, eight years later, when he was elected chancellor, those who cherished the legacy of "the other Germany in exile" had a reason to rejoice.

A similar development can be observed with regard to the role of resistance against Hitler. In the East, anti-fascism became the state doctrine early on. The more the regime in the East employed totalitarian measures to retain power, however, the less convincing this doctrine became. In the West, it took some years, and the efforts of many, to give due recognition to those who had stood up against Hitler. Perhaps the turning point in public sentiment was the speech by Theodor Heuss in 1954.

"We not only underwrite the inner motives" of those who opposed Hitler, Heuss stated, "but we underwrite their historical right to think and act the way they did. In thanking them, we are aware that their failure did not deprive their sacrifice of symbolic meaning: in a time in which dishonesty and cowardly, brutal arrogance of power had soiled the name of the Germans, they attempted to free the state from murderous maliciousness and to save their fatherland from destruction."<sup>6</sup>

Despite some difficulties, the new German army successfully incorporated the legacy of the officers who had stood up against Hitler.

Already in the 1950's, a large number of East Germans left to resettle in the West. Since

<sup>5</sup> Carla Borden and Jarrell C. Jackman, eds., *The Muses Flee Hitler* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Theodor Heuss, *Die groben Reden* (Munich: dtv, 1967) 212-222.

that time, there is no community or institution, no organization or party, in West Germany which does not contain a fair number of exiles from Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg, Pomerania and Mecklenburg. With a considerable degree of legitimacy, therefore, the West German policy of reunification was formulated by Germans from all parts of the country. After the wall was built in 1961, the exodus continued. While the numbers of those who fled became smaller, the circumstances became more dramatic. Some successfully overcame the border barriers; others found a way out via other East block, or neutral, countries. Quite a few who opposed the regime, were held as political prisoners and were freed by a deal between the two German governments in which the West paid a considerable sum of money per prisoner who was allowed to go West; some were exiled in a straight-forward manner by the East German regime hoping to reduce the pressure of inner opposition. In East Berlin, this policy was considered valid until the summer of 1989 when the Iron Curtain began to crumble and masses of East Germans fled their country via Hungary or the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw.

For the interpretation of these matters, the Basic Law plays a key role. Until 1949, in German constitutional thinking, the rights of the state overruled personal rights. In the Basic Law, for the first time, personal rights and liberties were given priority over the powers of the state, which was allowed to act only insofar as personal rights were not infringed. While resistance and exile have been a constant element of older German history, the Federal Republic not only guaranteed basic rights to its own citizens, but provided refuge to exiles from the other part of Germany and from other countries. With this, the rule of law had gained a new quality, although as we know, this did not automatically put an end to xenophobia. Besides, the obligation to provide asylum to persons persecuted for political reasons, has been and still is being, tested by thousands upon thousands of refugees from Third World countries who came to West Germany primarily for economic reasons yet claimed to be political refugees, rightfully requesting asylum. As many scholars pointed out in 1989, however, the Basic Law provided an enlightened framework for the development of democracy in Germany; The German Constitutional Court has wisely interpreted and emphatically guarded the Basic Law.

Before summing up, a few brief remarks about the role of historians in what I have called myth-creation and memory-control. In the Federal Republic, the part played by historians was most significant. Historians not only wrote the history of "the other Germany", but they also gave penetrating accounts of the Third Reich, including the persecution of the Jews and mass-murder. Furthermore, historians not only criticized German chauvinism, and demythologized German nationalism, but they discussed, at length and with much fervor, the question of how much of German politics under National Socialism were but a consequence of older traditions, thus linking, for example, the question of German guilt for the outbreak of the war in 1939 with the German aggressiveness and expansionism before 1914. Also, it linked both with yet older traditions such as Prussian hegemonical policies, which led to the defeat of Austria in 1866 and the war against France in 1870. While an older generation of German historians had praised the Prussian victory over Austria, representatives of a new generation of German historians, such as Thomas Nipperdey, deplored the events leading up to the battle of Königgrätz and called 1866 the first division of modern Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Important as this reevaluation of the Prussian-led Second Empire may be, for post-1945

<sup>7</sup> *Deutsche Geschichte 1945-1972* (Munich: Beck, 1983) 791.

Germany, no issue was more disturbing than the mass-murder of Jews by the Nazis at Auschwitz and other places. In the political arena, Adenauer shouldered the responsibility by arranging reparation payments to survivors. On the private level, many Germans joined the Society for Christian-Jewish Understanding and the German-Israel Society. Young Germans went to Israel to help build up that country, others restored Jewish cemeteries in Germany. Nor did German historians shy away from their responsibility. Some published extensive documentation about the "Final Solution". Others tracked the origins of antisemitism and described the various stages of development from Christian antisemitism to racially founded modern antisemitism. German political scientists analyzed the residues of antisemitism in post-war Germany. German publishers, journalists, and television cooperated in making known this most bitter part of the German past to a wider public. As for the historians, their approach resembled the approach taken by enlightenment historiography. While German historians of the 19th century and the post-1945 historians set out to destroy myths and to create a rationally controlled view of the past.

By contrast, in East Germany, historians looked differently at the German past, and the special debate about the German-Jewish relationship developed differently as well. As a consequence of the laws of Historical Materialism, as they were spelled out by Marx and Engels, and as they were applied by the ruling SED, historians were forced to engage in the propagation of this doctrine, which postulates that all history leads in dialectical leaps from feudalism to the rule of the bourgeoisie, and from there to socialism and communism.<sup>8</sup> As we know, this resulted in East German intellectual life in quite a bit of myth-creation. The peasants rising under the leadership of Thomas Muntzer, the revolutionary workers in 1918, and of course, the role of the Soviet Union, were all glorified. Inquiry into the past was directed by questions which were controlled by the political leadership. While the excesses of National Socialism, including the extermination camps were duly depicted, political reconciliation with Israel was evaded because the SED had opted, under pressure from Moscow, to support the cause of the Palestinians. As one can imagine, this resulted in a highly unsatisfactory situation. This may also be the reason why citizens who felt strongly about Israel, were overrepresented among dissidents in East Germany and those wishing to leave the country.

As we know, there were some changes with regard to historical research in East Germany since the late 1970's. For example, in 1983, Martin Luther was incorporated into the so-called progressive ancestry of the so-called first socialist state in German history. But characteristically enough, the orders for the reevaluation came from the top and were not the result of free historical research.<sup>9</sup> Until the collapse of the regime in the East in 1989, therefore, historiography in both parts of Germany were in sharp contrast. One engaged in myth-creation and the other involved in the destruction of myth.

In 1946, the "Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung", headed by Johannes R. Becher, invited Theodor Heuss to speak in Berlin. In conclusion, let me quote and use some of what Heuss said on March 18, 1946, less than a year after German unconditional surrender, on the topic of the future of Germany; "In intellectual and political life ...the question of how to come to terms with the German view of the past is the most difficult to

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Fischer and Gunther Heydemann, eds., *Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1988-1990).

<sup>9</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, "Die 15 Thesen der SED über Martin Luther," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 34, 1983, 722-738.

answer. It is not enough to get some cleaning-firm which takes off the brown color (the Nazi view) and then applies some other color which is readily available" Heuss admonished, "rather, we have to demand that we reintroduce the spirit of free inquiry into academia and that we profess that scholarly activities should be free." "After twelve years in the hell of history," Heuss said in conclusion, Germans were on the way to purification. Would they now reach paradise? No, Heuss contended, because paradise existed only in utopian novels. The Germans should be happy if they reached the solid ground of a free society, and this they should reach under the guidance of democracy.<sup>10</sup>

In the Federal Republic, much of what Heuss envisaged in 1946 became true. The solid ground of a free society has been reached with the help of a democratic system. Looking back on the forty years of the Federal Republic, we are able to detect the revival of parts of the German past which were lost in the decades before 1945 and which reappeared after 1949. I have drawn your attention to federalism, to the rule of law and to the views the Germans had of their past. Not that I think the Federal Republic became the paradise which Heuss already knew did not exist. We should acknowledge, however, that under the protection of the Western powers and because of the strong desire of many Germans to learn the lessons taught by the moral, political, and military catastrophe of the years from 1933 until 1945, that some of the best of the German past could be reactivated and gain historical Gestalt in the Federal Republic. This, in turn, should help open our eyes to some of the treasures of the German past. How much of this can be preserved into the future, how much of it will continue to grow now that Germany is united, we do not know. The progress that we have experienced in the Federal Republic should help us, however, to overcome the obstacles that may be ahead. In this, I think, historians have to play a double role; 1. by undigging, interpreting, and preserving the past, they should be able to contribute to the awareness that democracy has not come easy in Germany and, 2. by exercising and fostering the spirit of free inquiry, they should help to facilitate the kind of discourse which is essential for a free society, thus linking the united Germany firmly with the Western world.

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<sup>10</sup> Heuss, *Die groben Reden*, 81-93.