



AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

German Unity – A Project

Rita Kuczynski

The Wall should have been left standing: as a memorial. As a commemoration in stone it would be a resistance to amnesia. Because the past is uncertain, and becomes ever more uncertain over the years, even when we try to remember how it really was, we can no longer speak with certainty. We must rely on our memory and that is deceptive and hallucinatory. So it is in this autumn, already twenty years past, that the Iron Curtain has fallen in Europe. For today's twenty-year-olds, this is ancient history. Recounted by their parents. Often nostalgically romanticized not only by politicians, who speak adoringly of the transparency of that time, of the simplicity of the Cold War conflict in Europe. Because friend and foe stood directly across from each other.

And: at the time of the fall of the Wall, Germany was at the center and navel of world history, with the border of the East-West conflict running through her cities and towns and through even her streets. When an opposition movement developed in the socialist GDR, which had already developed in other Eastern Bloc countries for more than twenty years—one thinks of Poland, Hungary, or the former Czechoslovakia—opposition formed against the dismal situation also in the GDR. In comparison to the other socialist states a small, but quickly effective opposition group formed at the apex of the citizens' movement and was crucial in peacefully bringing about the collapse of state-sponsored socialism in the GDR.

After, then, the victorious powers of World War II (the U.S., England, France, and the Soviet Union) agreed to replace Yalta with the Four Powers Agreement, the way to German unity was free after forty years of division.

What came in 1990 is well-known: in March the first free election on East German soil, in which the East Germans decided in favor of German unification, after which came the D-Mark in July and the promise of blooming landscapes, then came reunification in the form of the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic of Germany on the basis of the Basic Law, then came the *Treuhand*, which phased out the ailing GDR enterprises and after which came approximately 25 percent and more unemployment for the eastern Germans.

After the end of the Eastern Bloc, despite occasional difficulties, which were manageable, not only many eastern Germans thought of a transition period from a closed to an open society, from tyranny to freedom, from dictatorship to democracy, from autarky to world trade, from divided to united Europe. Many a historian spoke of the end of history. But then—as we know—everything changed after September 11, 2001. The interim between a historical break-up was abruptly brought to an end. The enemies changed; the East-West conflict was finally replaced by the North-South conflict.

When I think of the world, the time of the Cold War is distant to me. The coordinates of world history have become different, not only between the U.S. and Europe. To name only a few key points: Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo, Iran, the 2008 world financial crisis—all identify our time.

However, when I think of Germany, I often have the impression that the end of the East-West conflict was just yesterday. Indeed, Germany is nationally united. Much has happened in eastern Germany: the houses and streets in most cities have been renovated; the highways from west to east have been built. We fill up our cars with the same gas, watch the same television programs, shop in the same discount and whole food stores, meet at McDonalds, but for all that we are still more foreign than near. Although German unification is celebrated on appropriate occasions not only in the media, its meaning for the world and also for Germany emphasized, but the people in eastern Germany and the people in western Germany, despite all efforts on both sides, have not become much closer. Thus, the time for a national unity and freedom memorial has also not yet come. Thus, the 532 designs from artists, which were submitted in a national competition for this memorial, have been rejected as unacceptable. However, it would be a big mistake to think that after sixty years of the Federal Republic any talent among German artists has gone missing. On the contrary: they have only reflected where

German unity really stands and it was their rather unwanted contribution for clarifying German-German conditions in the twentieth year of German reunification. They demonstrate: the time for a national unity and freedom memorial is still not ripe. Insofar, the artists and the 532 submitted proposals complement and confirm the findings of innumerable polls by the Institute for Opinion Research that depict exactly this current situation.

The Allensbacher Institute for Opinion Research's survey (see Allensbacher Report 7/2009) in spring 2009, for example, asked about differences and similarities between Germans in eastern and western Germany and show the following result: existing differences were stressed over any similarities in both the east and the west. Forty-two percent of western Germans say "the differences outweigh," and only 20 percent see predominantly similarities. The public in eastern Germany accentuates the differences between western and eastern Germans more starkly: only about one-tenth (11 percent) in eastern Germany see overall similarities with western Germans. Sixty-three percent emphasize that western and eastern Germans are different from each other. Also interesting about the result of this survey is this: up until 2004, the perception of stated differences had continually decreased. In 2004 only 38 percent of westerners and 43 percent of easterners believed that the differences outweighed the similarities between both sections of the population. Only within the last five years has the gap within the subjective perception of west and east widened again: 63 percent of eastern Germans see major differences between eastern and western Germans. That is 20 percent more than in 2004. The difference has also grown among western Germans, though only by 4 percent: from 38 to 42 percent.

Many other opinion surveys and studies have found that reciprocal disillusionment and alienation has intensified again. This is not primarily true for those born after 1989, for whom German unity is more of a natural condition and form of existence. In fact, this generation, currently and for the foreseeable future, contains only a fraction of the politically active population.

Naturally, it cannot be denied that the differences in income distribution between eastern and western Germany does not exactly contribute to strengthening the feelings of togetherness among both publics—especially as those differences have grown larger in recent years. Additionally, poverty in western Germany remains fractional. In eastern Germany it has become—and this is new—nearly region-wide after twenty years of German unity. That means a very "homogenous" distribution of poverty at a high level. The poverty rate in the new *Bundesländer* varies between 19 and 24.3 percent. But the differences in the distribution of income in individual regions in Germany are not the only reason why east and west have drifted apart again twenty years after the fall of the Wall. The differences between Baden-Württemberg with 10 percent, Bavaria with 11 percent, and Lower Saxony with 15.5 percent, or even Bremen with 19.1 percent poverty are considerable. However, these differences in the distribution of income among the residents of the old *Bundesländer* do not result in feeling alienated from each other as Germans or in questioning their sense of belonging to western German society.

No, the cause of the growing and hardening alienation between eastern and western Germans in the twentieth year of German unity is based on a very different mentality that brings with it its own diverse level of emotions. Forty years of a state socialist regime resulted in breaking the cultural flow of bourgeois society and the elimination of the bourgeois class in the GDR by abolishing private property and creating a near socially homogenous "working-class society." It broke the traditional bond between the society and the two large churches of Christian denomination, with the result that 70 percent of GDR citizens were nondenominational by 1990. This lack of influence from a bourgeois class and from the churches impacted the mentality of East Germans. In place of the moral and cultural values, which had grown over centuries, the Communist Party had to give the people new values and ideals on which they should base their actions. The dogma was to create the new, the socialist human being. This "new human being" was supposed to be freed through sheer education from all past, harmful, and reactionary—that is, bourgeois—history of civilizations. Man should live selflessly for the "cause" prescribed by the new type of communist party, or to say it with an intellectual twist, to subscribe to the "law of history."

Many people in the GDR were annoyed by the amount of agitation and propaganda that the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) employed to create the new, the socialist identical human being. Many thought that this was only communist hoopla, an ideological trick, and they laughed about the prevailing orthodoxy. Only after the fall of the Wall did eastern Germans realize, first among themselves, that their socialist life in the GDR and their education to become the "new human being" also had ramifications. Their life in a dictatorship also had an impact on their mentality and feelings. The custodial rule of the state over their lives, the state-ideological attempt to eliminate any individualism if it did not serve the enhancement of socialism, and the similar living conditions of all GDR citizens with a fairly low living standard, had shaped them. Talking about these lives and these experiences sounds today, after almost twenty years, as if recounting stories from a different world that has disappeared. This marks the limits of understanding between eastern and western German siblings—limits that are more than just dissonance of language.

Eastern German socialization produced a different kind, if not to say a different type, of German. These mental differences cannot be drowned out by the ritualized songs of the instituted anniversaries. Despite all of the assimilation of eastern

German to western German society for better or for worse, there is an eastern German society whose existence can no longer be denied after twenty years. This might also be based on the fact that for the majority of today's eastern Germans, the return of the market economy did not open new chances to reach satisfaction through the work place. The eastern Germans did not share the riches of the German society after the accession, but rather the majority became dependent on hand-outs. The almost universal poverty rate of 22 percent in eastern Germany documents this. This is also why most people in the new *Länder* consider themselves eastern Germans, according to opinion polls. Seventy-three percent still have the feeling of being underprivileged vis-à-vis western Germans. In western Germany, about 25 percent of people feel disadvantaged vis-à-vis eastern Germans—also because of the continuing transfer of money to eastern Germany.

Thus, twenty years after German unification, two parallel societies exist. Two identities that exist next to each other due to their different histories that took place over forty years. A “great story” that looks into the future cannot ignore these conflicting identities and their historical origin. The questions of who we are, who we are not, and what kind of cohabitation should prevail in a united Germany are thus still prevalent, even in the twentieth year of German unity. The answer to those questions, however, can only be found with an economic convergence whose basis has to be the decrease of mutual contempt and the increase of reciprocal acknowledgement of the other as equal. A “great story” of Germany that looks into the future will have to incorporate different memories and experiences.

The currently irreconcilable historical narratives of eastern and western Germany, which are comprised of the eastern German transfiguration of the GDR and the western German transfiguration of the past of the Federal Republic, will have to be abandoned to achieve such a joint story for the insight that the history of both parts of Germany was the history of all of Germany during the Cold War. That means, however, to acknowledge that the Federal Republic would not have become the state it was militarily, politically, and economically in 1989 without the Iron Curtain. The FRG was only the other part of Germany that was born as result of the victory over National Socialism; the allies determined the border to the East. Only a learning process that the history of the FRG is not the history of one thing but is rather connected with the history of the GDR and the division of Europe after 1945, that although all of Germany existed separately during the Cold War, it was still connected to each other through correspondence and had interdependent historical experiences, can be the starting point for a “great story” of two, still today, collectively-shared identities, which then also leaves room for different memories and experiences.

Only if the unified German society attempts to explore the successes and failures of western and eastern German societal history between 1945 and 1990 on the basis of the longtime history in Europe and in the context of the Cold War, when it stops focusing only on western German *Länder*, will a history of memories develop, which can encompass Germany in Europe and the world. The historical stroke of luck of German unity and the success of European unification so far would then not be lacking in this new “great story.”

The proposals for a national Unity and Freedom Memorial in Germany would then also be able to persevere against the Berlin Wall as memorial and stony memory.

Rita Kuczynski is a German journalist and author.

AICGS is grateful to the Transatlantik-Programm der Bundesregierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland aus Mitteln des European Recovery Program (ERP) des Bundesministeriums für Wirtschaft und Technologie (BMWi) and the Draeger Foundation for their generous support of this essay.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone.
They do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.