

## Germany and Poland 1989-2009: The East-West Divide in a Nutshell

*By Klaus Bachmann*

Do symbolic politics still play a role in East-West relations?

How do memories of communism and fascism manifest themselves in eastern and western political systems?

Visitors to the Polish embassy in Berlin will notice a big poster on display showing a cowboy ready for a shoot-out. "It started in Poland," states the poster, but don't be confused—Polish diplomats do not claim John Wayne as a Pole. The cowboy on the poster was originally used by the Citizens Committees of the democratic opposition during the election campaign of 1989. This led to the formation of the first pluralist government in Poland and provided the turning point for the transition from communism to democracy. In 1989, the spin doctors of the Solidarity movement saw the election as a "High Noon" between the former regime and its democratic challengers. Today, displaying the High Noon poster from 1989 emphasizes Poland's claim that the dismantling of communism did not start with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but with the emergence of the first independent trade union in the Eastern bloc, the Solidarity movement, in 1981.

The claim marks one of the main trends in Polish-German disputes after 1989: the more the interests of both countries converge, the more importance symbolic quarrels and debates about the meaning of the past take on. In many aspects, it is an East-West divide that can be seen in these disputes; a cleavage of values between an individualistic, post-national, and post-modern western Europe, and a culture of collectivist, national, and traditional values in central and eastern Europe (CEE). Thus, the smaller the differences in geopolitical and geostrategic interests and security perceptions, the higher the emphasis on issues such as attitudes toward history, symbolic politics, and identity.

In 1989, many factors contributed to the breakdown of communism: the Helsinki process in the 1970s, the emergence of dissident groups in many Warsaw Pact countries, the rise of Glasnost, the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from its dominance in the western part of its sphere, the U.S.-imposed arms race, the economic collapse of the USSR's western satellites, and the exodus of thousands of GDR citizens (which was tolerated by the democratizing regimes of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary). Even then, transition was viewed as a liberal democratic revolution in the West. It was also a victory for national movements and national sovereignty by the new political establishments of the CEE countries who chose national and ethnic labels, rather than liberal democratic ones, for their movements and parties.

When the Soviet system collapsed, the radical changes in foreign policy paradigms became obvious. Western Europe—and the two Germanys, as the states most affected by the changes—had a strong interest in stabilizing the new democracies and markets. East Germany wanted to achieve this by consolidating democracy and transitioning to a market economy, catching up with its Western partners, and joining the European Community (EC) and NATO. Across Europe it was believed that enlarging the EC would enhance reforms in the east, provide a reunited Germany with access to bigger and more dynamic markets, and would "water down" the political influence that a Germany of 80 million people could have within the EC.

Both cooperation and rival discourse had been taking place between Austria and

Hungary, France and Romania, Italy and the former Yugoslavia, and northern Europe and the Baltic countries. However, the most stirring was between the two major countries of “old” and “new” Europe, Germany and Poland, since both played the role of forerunners for their smaller neighbors. It was the second Polish government (and the first without communist generals as ministers) of Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, which spoke of a “community of common interests” between Germany and Poland. Until then, the dominant discourse regarding the mutual relationship was more about being “eternal enemies” than it was of cooperation and friendship. When German chancellor Helmut Kohl pushed through reunification, his eloquent silence regarding Germany’s new eastern border (with Poland) became a litmus test for Germany’s relations with its eastern neighbors and its readiness to endorse the lessons of history. When the EU’s eastern enlargement negotiations opened in 1997, it was clear that the biggest stumbling blocks would need to be lifted by Germany and Poland. In May 2004, ten new member states entered the EU, with Poland as the largest newcomer. Finally, all basic security needs and hopes for economic development and modernization had been fulfilled.

When discussing the reunification of Europe and the reconciliation of former enemies, one tends to underestimate the importance of symbolic politics, identities, experience, and values. Despite the elaborate treaty ceremonies, solemn declarations, and financial transfers, a rift became apparent between East and West. Western Europe’s expansion of liberal professions and services and the suppression of heavy industry in the 1960s and 1970s caused a strong value shift from materialist, collectivist, and hierarchical orientations to more individualist and creative values. Conversely, farming and industry remained dominant in Central and Eastern Europe and the centrally planned economy blocked the expansion of trade, services, and entrepreneurship, while continuing to strengthen traditionalist values. The “national paradigm” of the West abandoned the traditional ideas of family, nation, class, and religion; however these same ideas gained new momentum in the East. Today, it is impossible to understand Polish politics without referencing religion, family, nation, and history; elements which are absolutely obsolete in, for example, Dutch politics.

History has also been a contributing factor to the increasing rift between East and West. When the “old” member countries of the EU launched a “European Arrest warrant” in 2002, they also criminalized extreme right-wing “hate crimes” and racism. Holocaust denial (and sometimes other aspects of Nazi and Fascist rule in Europe) are prohibited in many western EU countries and right-wing parties are suppressed or isolated in Belgium, France, and Germany. Only in central and eastern Europe does the notion of “communist crimes” make it into criminal law. From the perspective of many eastern Europeans, including Poland and the Baltic countries, the advance of the Red Army after 1943 was not about liberation, but about replacing one occupation (a relatively short German one) by a (relatively long) Soviet one. This communist/anti-communist divide is more than just symbolic and historic. Socialist and communist parties played a substantial role in the political systems of France, Italy, Northern Europe, and Germany. Once again, the cases of Poland and Germany highlight the divide between East and West. After reunification, support of left wing parties, ranging from PDS/Die Linke to the Green Party, has increased in Germany. In Poland, the post-communist left is weaker than ever and the anti-modernization protest is channeled into nationalist movements and religious right-wing parties.

Many different perspectives exist as a result of this divide and they often clash during commemoration ceremonies and political events with a high level of symbolic importance. While 1989 serves as only one example, the question remains whether it began with Solidarity, Gorbachev, detente, or the exodus from the GDR. Did the events of 1989 liberate the oppressed nations of the East, or extend a neo-liberal order to the whole of Europe? Despite the conflicts over different values and experiences between East and West, it should not be forgotten that in 1989, when the highly disputed events

The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) strengthens the German-American relationship in an evolving Europe and changing world. Affiliated with the Johns Hopkins University, the Institute produces objective and original analyses of developments and trends in Germany, Europe, and the United States; creates new transatlantic networks; and facilitates dialogue among the business, political, and academic communities to manage differences and define and promote common interests.

Through its three program areas (Business & Economics; Foreign & Domestic Policy; and Society, Culture, & Politics), AICGS provides a comprehensive program of public forums, policy studies, research, and study groups designed to enrich the political, corporate, and scholarly constituencies it serves.

AICGS  
1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.aicgs.org](http://www.aicgs.org)

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.

were actually taking place, no one was eager to debate values, traditions, identities, and representations. Most were occupied with managing transition, negotiating the post-Cold War order, and establishing what Gorbachev referred to as the “Common European House” which, to a large extent, has come together. In other words, quarrels over history and symbolic politics are a luxury afforded to eastern and western Europeans today, since the basic problems were solved somehow between 1989 and 2004.

*Dr. Klaus Bachmann is Professor of Political Science at the University of Wrocław, Poland and the Warsaw School for Social Psychology. He is head of the board of the Foundation for European Studies, Wrocław and was a DAAD/AICGS fellow in 2007.*

***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.***