

REFLECTIONS ON THE GERMAN PUZZLE

The prospect of a reunified Germany in the centre of Europe is supposed to scare everyone; but who really cares?

BY THOMAS RISSE-KAPPEN

THE "GERMAN QUESTION" HAD SEEMED settled. After all, a unified Germany in the middle of Europe failed twice in this century; it was deeply involved in causing World War I and it brought about World War II. There would be no third chance. Even in the midst of widespread political instability in Eastern Europe, the division of Germany, at least, appeared solid. Furthermore, there seemed to be no reason to believe that Germans – East or West – had a hidden agenda regarding reunification. The famous West German *Ostpolitik* – the policy improving the relationship with Eastern Europe, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and the Soviet Union, was possible only on the basis of the territorial and political status quo in Europe. Moreover, one could argue that the generation with personal experience of a unified German state was about to lose control over the two Germanies and that younger Germans, in both East and West, lacked any emotional attachment to a greater Germany.

The events of this fall, however, challenged the conventional wisdom. All of the sudden, the German question was back on the international agenda. First, there was the mass exodus from East Germany accompanied by unprecedented scenes on television: refugees in the Prague West German embassy crying "freedom" when Foreign Minister Genscher announced the deal he had cut with the GDR to allow them to leave for the West; thousands crying "Deutschland" (Germany) when finally arriving in West Germany, just having left East Germany; and in the midst of it all, the East German "Socialist Unity Party" (SED), celebrating forty years of "victorious socialism" over the capitalist West, lining up with the China's leadership against the "imperialist campaign to eradicate socialism."

Second and even more important, those who decided to stay in the country, spoke out. Supported and protected by the Protestant church, the political opposition got organized and staged the largest (spontaneous and unofficial) mass demonstrations East Germany has ever seen (including the events of 1953

when much smaller protests were violently suppressed). Hundreds of thousands gathered in East Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig.

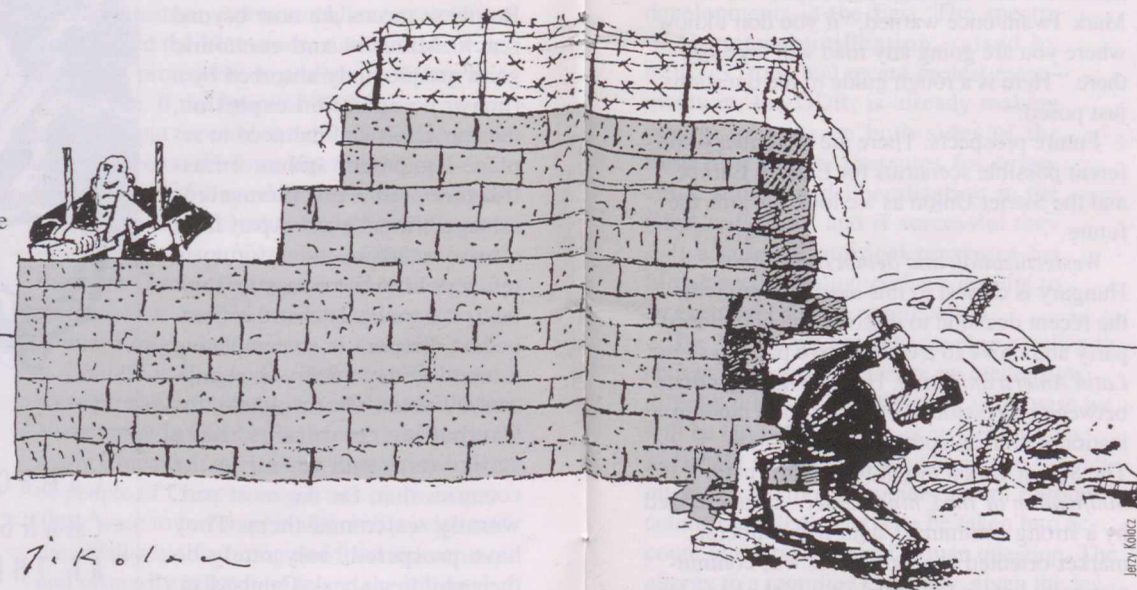
The political opposition – which had existed prior to these recent events, but could for the first time attract open, mass support – sees democratic socialism, not capitalism, as the answer to the GDR's problems. In short, these East Germans do not want to remain the left-overs of Stalinism in an era of reform in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They want the German Democratic Republic to live up to its name.

Whatever the communist party's real intentions are, a strategy of mere rhetoric and buying time will not work. There is a democratic revolution underway, and only genuine political reforms will relieve the pressure on the East German system and prevent a further mass exodus.

WHAT DO THESE EVENTS MEAN FOR THE TWO Germanies in a post-Cold War European order? The following considerations are tentative, for if anything is certain these days, it is uncertainty about the future. To begin with, the argument that a reformed GDR would lose its *raison d'être* as an independent state is seriously flawed. This proposition is put forward by hard-liners in East Berlin who resist reforms and, ironically, by some Westerners who cannot imagine that a democratized East Germany might choose an alternative to Stalinism other than Western-style capitalism. It is argued that if the Germanies become indistinguishable in their political, economic, and social systems, the trend towards reunification would be irresistible. According to this logic there should, therefore, be a strong tendency for Austria and the Federal Republic to unify. Austrians and West Germans speak the same language, have similar political and economic systems, and there are lots of cultural bonds between the two countries. Yet, nobody talks about an Austrian-German unification.

Moreover, one should not forget that in all of German history since the middle ages, a unitary German state existed for only seventy-four years – between 1871 and 1945.

Indeed, it is conceivable that the GDR would in fact gain in identity as it embarks on a process of political reform. Right now, the East German state has only a borrowed legitimacy as Eastern Europe's Stalinist front-line, which has constantly to distance itself from the Federal Republic. If there is any East German self-identification at all, it is defined in contrast to West Germany. For the past forty years, the presence of Soviet troops in the country has had to substitute for this lack of legitimacy. When Gorbachev told Honecker during his visit to East Berlin that decisions about the



GDR have to be made in East Berlin and not in Moscow, he was making clear that those days are over. The regime can no longer count on the USSR to back it against its own people.

Democratizing the system might be the only way – and the last chance for the current leadership – to gain support from East Germans. Here it should be noted that unlike

Poland and the Soviet Union, East Germany is still in relatively good economic shape, with the per capita income roughly comparable to Italy's. The recent exodus was apparently triggered as much by political frustration as economic factors.

IF IT IS FAR FROM CERTAIN THAT A REVAMPED East Germany would disappear as an independent state, what about its Western cousin? The cacophony of voices rising from the Federal Republic these days might suggest that West Germans are taking advantage of a long-awaited opportunity to promote reunification. There have been press reports, for example, that the Federal government wants to put the German question back on the East-West agenda. Some conservatives have even re-opened the issue of the Poland's Western frontier, the Oder-Neisse line, which was supposedly settled once and for all with the West German-Polish treaty of 1970.

A good deal of the noise is an understandable reaction to the surprising events in East Germany. A lot of the rest originates in West German domestic politics. The emergence of a reactionary right-wing party, the *Republikaner*, seriously threatens the power base of the governing Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). If the present trend continues, the CDU might be out of power as a result of next year's federal elections. Thus, Chancellor Kohl has obviously

decided to step up the rhetoric on reunification in order to appeal to conservative voters. Moreover, his party's right wing has its own agenda. The Social Democratic Party (the SPD, the Federal Republic's left opposition),

on the other hand, which used to maintain close contacts with the East German SED, does not want to be perceived as "soft" on East Berlin these days.

Behind these dissonant voices, however, is a fairly broad consensus in Bonn ranging from the centre-right to the centre-left: first, that democracy and freedom are more important than German unity – hence the urging for reforms in the GDR; and second, that the German question cannot be separated from the larger issue of the future of Europe and the two alliance blocs. Thus, there is overwhelming agreement among the FRG's foreign policy elite – and obviously among the opposition groups in East Germany, too, not to mention the current regime – that the idea of the two Germanies leaving their respective alliances and gaining a neutralist, reunified status is neither desirable nor feasible. It follows, then, that Germany will remain divided as long as NATO and the Warsaw Pact continue to exist, and that both German states accept this.

WHERE DOES ALL THIS LEAVE THE GERMAN question? More important still, what precisely is the German question? For forty years the issue has had both internal and external dimensions. The internal part concerned human rights, democracy, and self-determination for people in both Germanies. Political reforms in the GDR would take care of this aspect of the question. After all, if the Cold War was about democracy and freedom in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, then the German question is about the same for East Germany.

By comparison, the external feature of the question – the nature of the relationship between the two states – is of secondary importance. Possible solutions are to be found between two extremes. On the one hand, the two countries could deal with each other as fully sovereign and independent states. For the Federal Republic, this would require formal recognition of the GDR and a change of its constitution which still commits the country to German unity. Both are unlikely.

Moreover, there has always been a special relationship between West and East Germany. Even at the height of the Cold War, certain contacts between the two states were maintained, especially in the areas of trade and of access to West Berlin. To treat inter-German relations like any other state-to-state relationship is to ignore the political, economic, social, and cultural ties between the two countries which are still strong, even after forty years of division.

On the other hand, the creation of a unitary German state is not necessarily a solution for overcoming the division, and certainly not the most desirable one. Even the West German constitution does not require it. And there are the legitimate worries of Poland, France, the

Netherlands, the Soviet Union, and other countries about a unified Germany, which have to be taken into account.

WHAT THIS BOILS DOWN TO IS THAT THE German issue should be dealt with in the context of the larger post-Cold War European order. Assuming things work smoothly (hardly guaranteed), a new European order which unites the continent is conceivable within the next ten to twenty years. It should be built upon the process started in Helsinki in 1975 (the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe – CSCE). The advantages of the CSCE, as compared to other European institutions, are that it is multilateral and not bloc-to-bloc, that both superpowers and Canada are part of it, and that the European non-aligned and neutral countries participate. These features would have to be preserved in any new European order which provided security for its members primarily by non-military, cooperative arrangements, and mutual guarantees, and which reduced military forces to very low levels. Both NATO and the Warsaw Pact would be needed to manage the transition, and as they subsequently lose their significance as the organizing factors in the European order, might wither away.

In such a context, German unity would appear less threatening to the rest of the world. National sovereignty in the traditional sense would be largely obsolete anyway, since many issues which used to be decided on national levels, would be transferred to international institutions like the European Community or CSCE. It would then be almost irrelevant whether the two Germanies continued to exist as independent states or decided to form a confederation of some kind.

CAN WE GET THERE FROM HERE, GIVEN THE present turmoil in the Eastern bloc? It is the economic condition of these countries that is the crucial factor. While it is mainly up to the East Europeans and the Soviets to prevent the situation from reaching catastrophic dimensions, the West has its responsibilities too. Why not embark upon Marshall Plan-type aid for Eastern Europe in order to help stabilize their economies? Why not strike comprehensive arms control deals achieving deep cuts in the conventional and nuclear arsenals? Deep cuts are an essential precondition for achieving a European peace order in which the German question can be settled in a satisfactory way for Germans and for their neighbors. And should the situation become acutely unstable, substantially lower levels of military forces would make any crisis less dangerous for everyone. □