

INTRODUCTION

The Thirtieth Anniversary of The Fall of the Berlin Wall and Unification

Eric Langenbacher

Government, Georgetown University

*I*t sometimes seems that Germany is a country perpetually caught in the past. There are so many anniversaries that some sort of tracker is necessary to remember them all. Commemorations in 2019 included the seventieth anniversaries of the foundation of the Federal Republic and the formation of the NATO alliance, the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, the 100th anniversaries of the Treaty of Versailles, the foundation of the Weimar Republic, and German women achieving the right to vote. In 2020, important commemorations include the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the 250th anniversaries of Beethoven's and Hegel's birth, as well as the 100th anniversary of the HARIBO company that invented gummy bears.

Of all of these various anniversaries, for observers of German politics, two dates are of especial import. 2019 witnessed the thirtieth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November and 2020 celebrates thirty years of formal reunification on 3 October. Three decades mark a generation of change and evolution in a variety of policy and issue areas. This is also an important moment because it is unlikely that another such opportunity to reflect will arise until the fiftieth anniversaries in 2039 and 2040. I do not think the fortieth anniversary will garner such widespread attention—not the least because of the seeming anniversary fatigue that is already or will soon set in in Germany and among scholars. The anniversaries are thus an excellent opportunity for scholars to reflect on the consequences and meanings of these events today, as well as on how memory of 1989/1990 has evolved over time. The editors of *German Politics and Society* have assembled over a dozen scholarly articles in two special issues of the journal to engage in precisely such reflection.

This first special issue begins with Helga Welsh assessing the state of inner unity between the eastern and western regions. Although the last few years have renewed our attention to East-West differences, Welsh argues



that a more differentiated view is now necessary. We need to deconstruct “the East” and look at what is going on at a more local level. Such an analysis shows that portions of the old German Democratic Republic are doing fine today, even while other regions continue to struggle. Moreover, it is important to extend this analytical lens to the entire country, an exercise that shows that instead of two salient regions in Germany, there are four or five today.

Christian Schweiger also focuses on the East-West cleavage, however, taking a more critical perspective. He argues that the persistent regional gap in almost all measures of economic and social well-being is a consequence of mistaken decisions made during and in the aftermath of reunification. Examples include the 1:1 exchange rate, privatization by the Treuhandanstalt, and Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s unrealistic promises. The result was the wholesale imposition of the western system on the East, generating decades of bitterness that culminated in the rise of the Alternative for Germany. Looking rather at the political cultural aspects of the divide, Lars Rensmann shows that the dominant values in the two regions have diverged considerably. Westerners hold more pro-democratic, self-expression values. Easterners, by contrast, have a shallower and more instrumentalist approach to liberal democracy akin to other Central and East European countries. One result of this divergence is the persistence of xenophobic and authoritarian mindsets in the east, a partial explanation for the disproportional support of the AfD (and before of the Left Party) in that region.

Next, Joyce Mushaben argues convincingly that there has been a role reversal over the last thirty years in the eastern region. Initially, the big losers from reunification were eastern dissidents, intellectuals, and women. Especially women took the brunt of economic restructuring and lost many of the rights and policies they enjoyed during GDR times, for instance, child-care and access to abortion. By today, especially eastern men are doing quite poorly. The bitterness and sense of second-class citizenship that this has generated—caused and exacerbated by mistakes westerners made during and after reunification—are the main drivers behind the worrisome rise of the largely male AfD.

The papers devoted to an analysis of the social and political scene conclude with David Patton’s analysis of protest voting in the east since reunification. Framed around an outstanding review of the protest voting literature, Patton shows that the entire postunification period has witnessed an almost uninterrupted manifestation of such behavior. Long before the AfD became the vessel for such discontent, there was the former communist Party of Democratic Socialism (later Left Party), as well as a variety of right-radical

parties such as the German People's Union (DVU) and the National Democratic Party (NPD). There have also been waves of social protest mimicking the famous Monday demonstrations that destabilized the dictatorship in 1989. Thus, protest voting is a constant in the East, although it has swung right or left depending on the specific point in time.

The final two papers shift the focus to memory politics. Jenny Wüstenberg delves into the "memory scene" in contemporary Germany, specifically actors that are engaged with aspects of the East German historical legacy. She begins by looking at the structural condition of the memory sector today—one that combines an increasingly professional code of conduct including an ethos of sobriety and rationality about the past with an activist ethos stemming from leftist social movements of the 1970s Federal Republic and their ethos of keeping a distance from the state. This dominant state of affairs often conflicts with the emotional engagement of eastern German actors. A case study of East Berlin's Hohenschönhausen Memorial and the controversial leadership of Hubertus Knabe reveals all of these tensions and nuances. Dissatisfaction with the dominant (western) way of dealing with the past has even drawn some of the eastern activists towards the right-wing milieu of the AfD with its anti-elite, anti-western rhetoric.

Finally, Jon Berndt Olsen writes about two initiatives to create memorials to the events of 1989 and 1990. His first case study analyzes the efforts to create a national memorial to freedom and unity to be situated in front of the newly reconstructed imperial palace in central Berlin. All sorts of cleavages came out of the nearly two-decade long discussion: partisan politics with the Left Party reluctant to support such a memorial; heartfelt debates about how appropriate a monument to a positive event in German history is in the land of perpetrators; as well as all of the opinions about proper location and aesthetics. The second case study is Leipzig—one of the cities at the center of the 1989's peaceful revolution. Here, too, deep divisions arose between the parties and especially between what elected politicians and administrators advocated versus the preferences of average citizens. Despite years of effort, both projects remain uncompleted—perhaps a fitting metaphor for the state of German unity thirty years later.