



Individuals, Institutions, and Ideas

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(Post) Cold War European Cooperation and Security¹

Marina Pérez de Arcos

On 1 July 2017, leaders from across the European Union (EU) and beyond came together in the plenary hall of the European Parliament in Strasbourg at the first-ever European Ceremony of Honour. There, they paid final tribute to Helmut Kohl, former West German Chancellor and first chancellor of unified Germany. Draped in the blue-and-gold European Union flag and carried by eight members of the *Wachbataillon der Bundeswehr*, Kohl's casket was placed at the center of the plenary hall.

The symbolism of this event is worth dwelling on. The German *Bundeswehr's* elite drill unit, which is comprised of soldiers from all three armed services, is a stark symbol of Germany's might and self-rule. As they supported the EU flag, they showed that a strong and united Germany was a standard-bearer for the European project, while between the flag and the German *Bundeswehr* lay Chancellor Kohl. As Chancellor, he had reconciled European cooperation with German unity and the full attainment of sovereignty. As the leader of an EEC member-state jotted down in his notebook in 1990: "German unification and European integration: parallel processes."²

Kohl's European Ceremony of Honour prompts the consideration of three key themes that are addressed in this article. First, it suggests that we re-evaluate some of the more established narratives accompanying the fall of the Berlin Wall; second, that numerous gaps remain in the existing research; and third, that a multilevel (as well as a multinational) approach that brings together individuals, institutions, and ideas can be a useful way to approach the fall of the Berlin Wall. Regarding this latter point, Kohl's ceremony encourages us to examine some of the earlier

consequences of the fall, especially regarding European security and cooperation at the end of the Cold War. This article will consider each of these issues in turn.

Individuals

In her chapter addressing German unification between 1985 and 1991, Helga Haftendorn, professor emerita at the Free University of Berlin, states that "the only foreign leader who immediately backed the German position was US president George H. W. Bush."³ This is not completely accurate.

A small group of European leaders immediately backed the German position: the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, the President of Spain, Felipe González, and the Irish Prime Minister Charles Haughey. This was particularly significant, as Spain, a newcomer to the EEC, had held the European Community presidency between January and June 1989, and Ireland would hold the presidency of the EEC between January and June 1990, which meant that both states were in the EEC Troika at the time.

The existing literature has not given this handful of European leaders enough space or credit. For instance, in *Europe and the End of the Cold War: A Reappraisal*, González and Haughey are not mentioned once in relation to the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, while *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* offers them approximately one line in total.⁴ In contrast with the academic literature, in his 1996 memoirs, Kohl wrote: “In my opinion, at that time only the Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González and the Irish head of government Charles Haughey were in support of German unity without any ifs or buts.”⁵

Kohl expressed his gratitude to González on a number of occasions and in a plethora of different fora—private and public, bilateral and multilateral—as well as through written and *viva voce* statements.⁶ Similarly, in his speech at the Irish Parliament on 2 October 1996 (Germany Unity Day was the following day), Chancellor Kohl thanked both the Irish population and Prime Minister Haughey for the support and solidarity they had shown him and the German people six years previously, during a time of great dramatic changes in Berlin, Germany and Europe. “Wir haben es nicht vergessen,” he said, “we have not forgotten.”⁷

New evidence shows that González played the role of Kohl’s political wingman. He did so openly at EEC meetings, and more discreetly by suggesting to French President Mitterrand, through their respective foreign ministers, that EEC leaders should hold an emergency meeting before both the regular European Council summit in mid-December 1989 and the Malta Summit between US President Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. He wanted the EEC leaders to have a say before the superpowers spoke among themselves.

Though González’s motivations are clear, the reasons behind Prime Minister Haughey’s support would benefit from further research. It might have been partly spurred by his opposition to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s position or could have stemmed from his own aspirations for a united Ireland. One might also suspect, more importantly, that his support was the result of his understanding of partition/a hard border, which has subsequently played a role in the Brexit negotiations regarding the backstop and the presence of a hard border in Ireland.

In her visit to Ireland in April 2019, German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with people living in Irish border communities who were affected by the Troubles. This was soon after Britain’s Withdrawal Agreement was voted

down in Parliament, opposed by a number of Conservative MPs who disagreed with the Irish backstop. In Ireland, Chancellor Merkel, who grew up in East Germany, said “for 34 years I lived behind the Iron Curtain so I know only too well what it means once borders vanish, once walls fall.” In addition, she stated that a solution maintaining an open border must be found and that she is aware of what is at stake.⁸ With implications elsewhere today, a revised narrative addressing the fall of the Berlin Wall is increasingly important. By focusing on the few EC leaders who supported the German position it becomes possible to demonstrate the at times highly significant role of individual participants within broader historical developments.

Institutions

Recently published research has dispelled the ‘legend’ of British opposition to German unification by diminishing the role played by Thatcher and raising the profile of the Foreign Office, which highlights the importance of institutions with regard to individuals.

In Kohl’s words, Thatcher was “unfriendly, even dangerous.”⁹ She told Gorbachev two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall that “we do not want the unification of Germany” and that “although NATO traditionally made statements supporting Germany’s aspirations to be reunited, in practice we would not welcome it at all.”¹⁰ The third volume of her authorized biography indicates that this anti-Germanism extended back to her childhood, and was so strong she could not see past it.¹¹

Indeed, at a meeting in Brussels on 3 December 1989, President Bush asked Kohl if “any of the EC leaders (were) opposed to your 10 points?” Kohl answered: “Gonzalez was very positive. With respect to France, Mitterrand is wise. He knows it would be bad to oppose this. But he wants it to proceed moderately... The attitude of the Benelux countries is fine. Great Britain is rather reticent.” Bush replied: “That is the understatement of the year.”¹² The conversation then moved on to the Netherlands specifically, but Kohl soon returned to Thatcher: “Her ideas are simply pre-Churchill... She does the wrong thing. She should try to bind the Germans into the EC.”

Patrick Salmon, the Chief Historian at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, argues that “between November 1989 and late January 1990, Mrs Thatcher did oppose German unification and tried unsuccessfully to slow it down, if not impede it altogether. In the second, much longer period, despite her frequent and very public outbursts, Thatcher’s



role was marginal... The Foreign Office, headed by foreign secretary Douglas Hurd, successfully neutralised Thatcher's influence..."¹³ This revised understanding of Britain's position came from the efforts made by Salmon and his team to compile the *Documents on British Policy Overseas* on German Unification, 1989-1990, which was published in time for the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, well in advance of the normal thirty-year rule.¹⁴

Anniversaries and historical milestones give us the opportunity to reminisce, to recount and to research further. The volume on *Britain and the Revolutions in Eastern Europe, 1989* in the recently published collection *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, demonstrates how this kind of work can be achieved within the scholarly community.¹⁵ Alternatively, in an effort to bring order to the Foreign Office and Britain's reputation on a wider social scale, the National Archives launched a Cold War season lasting from 4 April 2019, exactly seventy years since NATO was formed, until 9 November, which was the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The season included an exhibition called 'Protect and Survive: Britain's Cold War Revealed',¹⁶ which presented Britain as having engaged closely with the rest of Europe throughout the Cold War.

On the weekend of the 5th and 6th October (the anniversary of German unification), the National Archives hosted an event titled 'The Big Draw,' which incorporated a small, replica Berlin Wall, on which graphic messages of peace and hope were displayed. This resembled Berlin's institutionalized celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009, during which Lech Walesa and the former Hungarian prime minister, Miklos Nemeth, pushed over the first of one thousand giant graffiti-adorned dominoes in a symbolic recreation of the collapse of communism in Berlin and the East. In her most recent book, Hope Harrison queries how a narrative surrounding the Berlin Wall can become institutionalized and presents a much-awaited study of the arc of memory politics in Germany since 1989.¹⁷ In doing so, she prompts the consideration of future work, which explores the memory politics within wider Europe regarding the fall of the Berlin Wall and the institutionalized European/EU narrative (is there one, and should there be one?). As we have seen, institutions can overrule individuals, and shape historiographical practices and collective memory.

East German President Hans Modrow, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and West and East Berlin Mayors Moper and Gicz take part in the official opening of the Brandenburg Gate on 22 December 1989 (photo: Wikimedia Commons/Defenseimagery.mil)

Ideas

Indeed, 1989 saw momentous changes in Europe. In both Poland and Czechoslovakia, dissidents who were formerly outlawed or imprisoned were running the country within months. Within four weeks of the major official fortieth anniversary celebrations of the German Democratic Republic, the state collapsed following the opening of the Berlin Wall. In a matter of days, the near twenty-five-year leadership of Romania was overthrown. Together with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, these events gave way to the narrative of the ‘new world order.’ Yet, despite these profound changes, NATO and the EEC—two Cold War institutions—remained.

Many paths were not taken, however. In a major speech in January 1990, West German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher stated, much to Kohl’s annoyance, that “proposals for incorporating the part of Germany at present forming the GDR in NATO’s military structure would block intra-German rapprochement.” He added that “NATO must... state unequivocally that whatever happens in the Warsaw Pact there will be no expansion of the NATO territory eastward.”¹⁸ Kohl’s proposed vision for Germany, Europe, and NATO was radically different.

President Mitterrand had an initial vision of a pan-European process of gradual transformation stabilized by a framework such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation Europe (CSCE). Mitterrand later clarified this vision at the end of 1989 by proposing a ‘European Confederation.’ Gorbachev proposed the creation of a ‘Common European Home,’ whereby both blocs would gradually disband their

military capabilities, and security functions would instead be assumed by the United Nations and the reinforced CSCE framework. In Czechoslovakia, President Vaclav Havel argued for the dissolution of both the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Instead, “the guarantor of security and stability should be pan-European structures instead of bloc-structures,”¹⁹ which ultimately meant that Europe should create a new security organization of its own.

The Cold War framework, including NATO and the EEC, remained central to the post-Cold War order. This was partly due to the fact that both NATO and the EEC had already successfully expanded during the 1980s. It is often forgotten that NATO’s more recent expansion had taken effect in 1982, and was confirmed via a referendum just three years prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1986, almost thirty years after West Germany joined NATO in 1955. In addition, the idea of the EEC as a promoter of democracy had worked. Both the second and third enlargements of the 1980s welcomed formerly authoritarian, and comparatively less wealthy, states, establishing a set of relevant and recent precedents within NATO and the EEC to support the German cause.

Equally, the process of deepening had started well before the Berlin Wall fell. Kohl’s strong and effective relationship with Jacques Delors had been central to the relaunch of European integration since Delors became president of the European Council in 1985. The European Council became the milieu in which EEC leaders developed a shared response to German unification and concluded that such a solution could be successful if carried out quickly enough. Although further archival-based research still needs to be conducted regarding the part he played in German unification, there is no doubt that Delors had a central role in motivating and energizing the process.

By deciding to build a stronger Europe in response to the prospect of increased German power, EEC member states simply intensified an effort that was already underway. To refer to Piers Ludlow’s culinary turn of phrase: “their very ability to concoct so quickly a recipe for dealing with a strengthened Germany reflected the fact that the ingredients had already been assembled and the cooking process had long since begun.”²⁰ As for NATO, Mary Elise Sarotte’s research shows not only that NATO’s future formed a key part of the negotiations on German unification but also that the preparations for the various negotiations included a speculative consideration of Eastern Europe. “The line of division between NATO and non-NATO Europe persisted, just moved eastwards.”²¹ It is clear that the ideas surrounding



‘The Day the Wall Came Down’, a statue located in the plaza of the George H. W. Bush Library by sculptor Veryl Goodnight. The statue symbolizes the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when George H. W. Bush was President (photo: Wikimedia Commons CC By 2.0)

the continuation and enlargement of both NATO and the EEC had a great deal of traction.

"The Day the Wall Came Down" is a sculpture by Veryl Goodnight honoring the spontaneous end of the Berlin Wall. It is displayed at the entrance of the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library at College Station, Texas, and depicts five horses leaping over actual pieces of the broken wall. Some have read this monumental sculpture as a claim to an almost exclusively American authorship of the fall of the Berlin Wall, or, as Haftendorn's assertion suggests, exceptional and immediate American solidarity with the German position. By returning to Helmut Kohl's European Ceremony of Honour at the European Parliament, however, both commemorations achieve far greater nuance and significance.

As his former European Council colleague and friend, Felipe González, stated at Kohl's Ceremony of Honour: "Kohl was able to ride the horse that knocked down the Wall, so as to bring about a united Germany within a united Europe."²² In the metaphor of Pferd und Reiter, Kohl was the figure riding the horse. However, he did so within the framework of what Delors called the decade of Europe's gallop, "le gallop européen," which was already underway in 1989 at the opening—the breach—of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps between now and the next major anniversary, additional multinational and multilevel approaches can move us further forward.

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