

Germany's Lingering Identity Crisis

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Introduction

In comparison with most of its European neighbors, Germany has had a particularly turbulent history. Whilst the post-World War II division of Germany was initially intended as a provisional agreement, there was little confidence of German reunification during the 1970's and 1980's, particularly amongst Western politicians and intellectuals. It therefore came as a surprise when, on the evening of November 9, 1989, an official of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), Günter Schabowski, made a public statement regarding the regulation of traveling within the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In answer to a question posed by an Italian journalist asking when new regulations allowing citizens to leave the GDR would be put into effect, the response was “ab sofort” – “immediately”. Berlin radio stations instantly reported the opening of the Berlin Wall, a message which led thousands of East and West Berliners to begin dismantling the barrier.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9th marked the starting point of German reunification and the end of the Cold War.

The good relationship between U.S. President George Bush Sr. and President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev allowed for the successful reunification of Germany. The process also led to a number of obligations that needed to be fulfilled. The US insisted that Germany join international organizations, such as NATO, and that the new Bundesländer would also be part of the European Community. The Soviet Union, which had been vital to the development of the GDR, stated that the German state should be neutral, and demanded financial assistance to support the returning Soviet soldiers. The agreement between both states was crucial in convincing France and Great

Britain that endorsement of the unification by the occupying powers was needed.

During its existence, however, the Berlin Wall came to be the manifestation of a physical and psychological divide between East and West. Whilst sharing a common language and history, citizens on each side of the iron curtain had different experiences of freedom, government, press, and the economy from the point of division onwards. These vastly different societies created certain cultural values and norms that could not be replaced or removed as easily as a physical structure. The influence of the Berlin wall can still be felt today: 18 years after reunification, Germans are still faced with social and economic challenges stemming from the East-West division.

The German-German relationship

Following the fall of the wall, the majority of the population in both East and West Germany were in favor of reunification. High-profile politicians from the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), however, would make negative or partially condescending comments towards the citizens in the East, whom they considered “poor relatives.” This can be seen in an excerpt from the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” written by Oscar LaFontaine (SPD). : “... in future, the citizens of the GDR should not be considered as Germans in the sense of basic constitutional law.”

In the GDR there was general support for the process of unification at all levels, though to different extents and for different reasons. The intellectual elite, for example, were primarily interested in political modernization rather than a complete eschewal of communist values. The majority of the population in the East were also attracted by the appeal of a market economy, which they saw as promising higher salaries and improved living standards.

Although there has been a vast improvement in the living standards of the East, many still complain about social and economic inequalities in

comparison with the West. These complaints relate to the relative values of salaries, pensions and social contributions, which a large number of Eastern Germans feel are unevenly distributed. Eastern Germans in public service, for example, work an average of 40 hours per week, and receive 67.5 percent of supplementary grants (vacation and Christmas bonuses). Their Western counterparts work an average of 38.5 hours a week, and receive 90 percent of these grants. As a result, only 13 percent of the East German population claim that their lives have improved since the fall of the wall. On the other hand, 75 percent of West German residents look forward to an end to the financial subsidies spent on the “Aufbau Ost”.

This perceived economic inequality between East and West, compounded by the tendency for East Germans to look back to the GDR with rose-tinted glasses (so-called Ostalgie), has led to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about former citizens of the GDR. Despite the common development and experiences between East and West Germans over the past 18 years, many West Germans still regard their Eastern countrymen as different. These differences are exacerbated by, and clearly visible in, the media, which has played a divisive role in the process. At the beginning of the 1990s, for example, subtitles appeared on television when a speaker was Bavarian. Now, by contrast, such subtitles are reserved for people from Saxony or Thuringen – the former East. Whether such subtitles are really needed is difficult to say, but their existence reinforces the sense of “otherness” between West and East.

The need for Cultural Diplomacy

The lengthy division of Germany into East and West has had a number of long-term consequences that remain salient today. Despite reunification, stereotypes and prejudice remain commonplace, aggravated by the media and hardened by reckless comments from senior figures. Whilst there are indications of progress, the political process of unification that has largely been completed must be accompanied by initiatives at the grass roots level

which seek to raise awareness about the experiences that have created the dual identity of Germany, and highlight that which all Germans have in common.