



**JÜRGEN
HABERMAS**

YEAR 30

**GERMANY'S
SECOND
CHANCE**

YEAR 30: GERMANY'S SECOND CHANCE

MERKEL'S EUROPEAN POLICY CHANGE OF COURSE
AND THE GERMAN UNIFICATION PROCESS

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ONE INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the seismic shift in world history of 1989-90 with the collapse of communism, the sudden eruption of life-changing events could be another watershed. This will be decided in the next few months—in Brussels and in Berlin too.

At first glance it might seem a bit far-fetched to compare the overcoming of a world order divided into two opposing camps and the global spread of victorious capitalism with the elemental nature of a pandemic that caught us off-guard and the related global economic crisis happening on an unprecedented scale. Yet if we Europeans can find a constructive response to the shock, this might provide a parallel between the two world-shattering events.

In those days, German and European unification were linked as if joined at the hip. Today, any connection between these two processes, self-evident then, is not so obvious. Yet, while Germany's national-day celebration (October 3rd) has remained curiously pallid during the last three decades, one might speculate along the following lines: imbalances within the German unification process are not the reason for the surprising revival of its European counterpart but the historical distance which we have now gained from those domestic problems has helped to make the federal government finally revert to the historic task it had put to one side—giving political shape and definition to Europe's future.

We owe this distancing not only to the worldwide turbulence wrought by the coronavirus crisis: in domestic policy the key stakes have changed decisively—this, above all, through the shift in the party-political balance of forces as a result of the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland*. It's precisely because of this that we have been given, 30 years after that epochal change, a second chance of advancing German and European unity in tandem.

In 1989-90 the unification of a Germany divided for four decades became possible overnight and this would trigger an inevitable shift in the balance of forces. This prospect

revived historic anxieties of a return of the ‘German question’. Whilst the United States supported the clever moves of the federal chancellor (Helmut Kohl), Germany’s European neighbours were alarmed by the spectre of the return of the Reich—the ‘medium-sized power’ which, since the days of Kaiser Wilhelm II, had always been too big to be peacefully integrated within its neighbourhood circle and yet too small to act as a hegemon. The desire to make Germany’s integration within the European order irreversible was—as the course of the euro crisis post-2010 underlined—only too justified.

Unlike the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who reeled back in shock and horror, the French president, François Mitterrand, bravely opted for going ahead. To fend off the nationalistic selfishness of a neighbour which might seek to play to its economic strength entirely in its own interest, he demanded of Kohl that he agree to bring in the euro.

The roots of this bold initiative, fought for by the European Commission president, Jacques Delors, go back to the year 1970 when the then European Community first aimed at forming a monetary union via the Werner report. In the end, that project collapsed because of currency upheavals and the end of the postwar Bretton Woods settlement. Yet, in the (1975-76) negotia-

tions between the then French and German leaders, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt respectively, these ideas returned to the table. If truth be told, Kohl—once Mitterrand had engineered the conclusions of the European Council in Strasbourg on December 9th 1989—acted, of course, out of political conviction when he pushed through the visionary link between national unity and the ground-breaking Maastricht treaty of 1992, in the face of political resistance back home.¹

Compared with this historic process, today sees the economic consequences of a pandemic burden the hardest-hit European Union member states in western and southern Europe with intolerable debt. This severely threatens the very existence of the currency union. It is precisely this risk that German exporters fear most and that has finally made the federal government much more amenable to the French president's determined push for closer European co-operation. A subsequent offensive mounted in unison by Emmanuel Macron and the chancellor, Angela Merkel, proposed a recovery fund built on long-term EU borrowings which, to a large extent, are destined for the most needy member states in the form of non-repayable grants. That proposal led, at the July 2020 summit, to a remarkable compromise. The decision of the European Council to adopt common European bonds, only possible because of Brexit, brought about the

first truly meaningful step towards integration since Maastricht.

Even if this decision is by no means cut and dried so far, Macron felt able to speak at the summit of 'the most important moment for Europe since the founding of the euro'. Certainly, and against Macron's wishes, Merkel stuck to her usual *modus operandi* of one small step at a time. The chancellor is not seeking a sustained institutional solution but insists on a one-off compensation for the economic havoc induced by the pandemic.² Although the incomplete political constitution of Europe's currency union lies behind this threat to its very existence, the shared borrowings of member states will not be made by the eurozone alone but by the union as a whole. But, then, as we all know, progress goes at a snail's pace—and on crooked paths.

TWO

HOW GERMAN UNITY AND EUROPEAN UNIFICATION HANG TOGETHER

If today, given the new life breathed into the European dynamic, we were to go back over three decades and point to a parallel with the initial links between the German and the European unification processes, we would have to start by recalling the braking effect that German unity put upon European policy. Even if the restoration of the German state was met, to some extent, by the pro-integrationist move of giving up the *Deutschmark*, this did not exactly deepen European co-operation.

For the former citizens of the German Democratic Republic, brought up within a completely different type of culture and politics, the theme of 'Europe' did not have the same importance and relevance as it did for citi-

zens of the 'old' (West German) federal republic. Since the (re)founding of national unity the interests and thinking of German governments have also changed. Attention was first wholly absorbed by the unprecedented task of adapting the decrepit GDR economy to the markets of Rhineland capitalism and hooking up a communist-controlled state bureaucracy to the administrative practices of a democratic state. Putting aside this domestic preoccupation, governments from Kohl onwards swiftly got used to the 'normalities' of the restored national state. Historians who vaunted this normality in those days may have somewhat prematurely dismissed the beginning of a post-national consciousness which at the time was emerging in West Germany. In any case, a far more confident foreign policy gave sceptical observers the impression that 'Berlin'—thanks to Germany's increased economic weight—wanted to look beyond its European neighbours and to relate immediately to the global powers of the US and China.

Nevertheless, national unity was not really the decisive reason why a hesitant federal government until very recently sided with London in favour of widening the EU as a whole, rather than undertake the overdue task of deepening the currency union's institutional structures. There were, rather, economic policy reasons which only

truly came to light in the banking and sovereign-debt crisis. Up until the Lisbon treaty, which came into force in December 2009, the EU was anyway preoccupied by managing the institutional consequences and social upheavals of the union's eastwards extension of 2004.

THREE

THE TURNING-POINT IN GERMAN POLICY TOWARDS EUROPE

Even before the introduction of the euro, decided upon in Maastricht, experts were already discussing the dysfunctional structure of the currency union. The politicians involved were also aware that a common currency, which removed the option of devaluing their national currency from economically weak member countries, was bound to increase existing imbalances within the currency union, so long as the political competences at the European level for providing counter-balancing measures were absent. The eurozone can only achieve stability by harmonising fiscal and budgetary policies—ultimately only by adopting a common fiscal, economic and social policy. So the currency union was created by its protagonists in the ready expectation that it could be

extended, in a series of stages, into a full-scale political union.

The absence of further reforms along these lines led during the financial and banking crisis which erupted in 2007 to the measures we know, some of them adopted outside prevailing EU legislation—and to the corresponding conflicts between so-called donor and creditor countries in Europe's north and south.¹ Germany, as an exporting nation, dug its heels in during this crisis and, mobilising against any debt mutualisation, rejected any further steps towards integration; it continued to do so when Macron pressed on from 2017 with far-reaching plans for strengthening the union by taking the necessary steps to pool sovereignty. So its finance minister and architect of the austerity policies imposed by Germany on the European Council can simply be accused of shedding crocodile tears when he now looks back and laments: 'Today, above all, one needs the courage we did not possess in the 2010 crisis to bring about greater integration within the eurozone. We cannot let the opportunity slip again but must use the current disruption to expand the currency union, via the European Recovery Fund, into a genuine economic union.'²

What Wolfgang Schäuble means by what he calls 'disruption' is the drastic economic consequences of the

pandemic. But why are Schäuble and Merkel calling for the courage they supposedly lacked ten years ago? Is it solely the economically based fear of a definitive collapse of the European project, which so changes the goalposts that this is enough on its own to explain this unexpected change of course? Or is it the dangers long since inherent in the new geo-political context which are putting the democratic way of life and cultural identity of Europeans to the test?

In a word: what lies behind the sudden, almost backdoor acceptance of debt mutualisation which had been demonised over the years? Even with all the *chutzpah* of this *volte-face*, Schäuble can at least look back on his own pro-European past in the 90s. But, given that we're talking about a deeply pragmatic politician like Merkel, always focused on the short-term and constantly driven by what opinion polls say, such a radical and abrupt change of course is still puzzling. Before she decided to give up the role of leader of the Brussels 'frugals' it was not just the polls that had to agree. No, as in previous cases, a shift in the domestic balance of political forces served to alter the relevant, determining factors.

What was striking was the absence of what would normally be reflex criticism within her party of Merkel's climbdown. Here, she decided as it were overnight to

work seamlessly with Macron and agree to a historic compromise which opens the door, however narrowly, to an EU future that had been closed till then. But where was the riposte from the powerful posse of Eurosceptic naysayers within her own ranks—from the normally outspoken economic wing of the Christian Democratic Union, the important business associations, the economic commentators of the leading media?

What has recently changed in German politics—and Merkel has always had a nose for this—is the fact that for the first time in the history of the federal republic a successful party to the right of the CDU and its Christian Social Union partner has set up its tent, one that combines anti-Europe criticism with an unprecedentedly radical, no longer stealthy but naked ethnocentric nationalism. Until then the CDU leadership had always ensured that German economic nationalism could be dressed up within pro-European language. But, with this shift in the political balance of forces, a potential wave of protest which had been blocked for years within the German unification process immediately found its voice.

FOUR

AFD AT THE INTERFACE OF THE
EUROPEAN/GERMAN UNIFICATION
PROCESS

The AfD was originally set up by a nationalist-conservative group of west German economists and business representatives, for whom the federal government's selected European policy at the height of the 2012 banking and sovereign-debt crisis did not adequately protect German economic interests. Added to this came something like a split in the CDU's national-conservative wing, named after Alfred Dregger, which today finds itself embodied in the figure of Alexander Gauland (AfD *Bundestag* group leader). As a litmus test for the intense nature of conflicts within the reunification process, this party first took flight when, from 2015, not least thanks to a way of thinking rooted in the old federal republic—namely the conservative dislike of the 1968 generation—it established itself more firmly in the east German

Länder, under the leadership of Frauke Petry and Jörg Meuthen. There it linked up with local themes within a swelling critique of unification policies.

Criticism of Europe worked as a catalyst for the amalgamation of west- and east-German protest voters, whose numbers grew rapidly on the back of the refugee crisis and rising xenophobia. The conflict between the CDU and the AfD could not be condensed in a more graphic and revealing scene than when on July 8th, the MEP Meuthen rose in the European Parliament and threw back at the chancellor—in her presentation of the planned recovery fund—the very arguments with which she had justified Schäuble’s austerity agenda over the previous decade.

Here we touch upon the interface at which the European and German unification processes are joined anew. Changes in the party-political spectrum often mirror deeper shifts in the political mentalities of an entire people. The change in European policy indicates, apart from Merkel's informed sensitivity towards a new political constellation, public awareness of the growing historical distance from both the happy moment when we regained national unity and the grindingly harsh process of unification.¹

It would be too easy to deduce this historicisation from the spate, timed for the 30th anniversary, of historical books, journalistic reports and more or less personally-laced retrospectives—this flood of publications reflects in turn the fact of a change in mutual relations between the eastern and western parts of the country. If a greater distance is now being taken towards the problems that arose in the aftermath of German unification, this shift can be ascribed to the polarised views about this event in German politics. Political regression, currently taking shape in the form of the AfD, has a confusingly ambivalent face: on the one hand it has acquired a shared, a pan-German character; on the other it meets in the east and the west quite different postwar narratives and ways of thinking. The historical distance makes both things much more obvious to us—that we share the same conflict with right-wing populism and that this conflict at the same time sheds light on the very different political mentalities that developed over four decades in the federal republic and the GDR respectively.

The dislocations in the political relationship between west and east Germany, which became manifest throughout the country, made us aware of the pan-German character of the subsequent process of clarifying what happened—above all with the drama that took place in February 2020 in Erfurt after the elections

to the Thuringian state legislature. The blunt positions taken initially against the breach of taboo in electing a Free Democratic Party state premier with the aid of the combined votes of the CDU and AfD came from the mouths of Merkel and Markus Söder (CSU leader), an east German and a Bavarian—the normative edge to both their statements was surprisingly sharp. The chancellor spoke of an ‘unforgivable procedure that must be reversed’. She gave added weight to her intransigence by sacking the special government representative for east Germany (who had been in favour of the tacit alliance with the far right). These unmistakable reactions meant more than simply recalling the party's rules on incompatibility.

Up to that point, political leaders dealt with ‘worried citizens’; now, they would have to end their disastrous flirt with what they had taken simply as misguided individuals. Given the chaotic political concatenation within the Thuringian party landscape and the vacillating behaviour of local CDU colleagues, the ambivalent strategy in play of too close an embrace (of the right) had to end straight away. The political recognition it gave a party to the right of the union (CDU/CSU) makes a difference compared with the mere fact that such a party exists. This means for the CDU giving up the opportunistic incorporation of a potential group of voters not

officially targeted by one's own political programme. At the same time, it means believing in a practice whereby voters who give voice to jackbooted, nationalistic, racist and anti-Semitic slogans have the right, as democratic fellow citizens, to be taken seriously—that is, to be criticised without mercy.

FIVE
THE SHOCK OF ERFURT IS AN ALL-
GERMAN PROBLEM

What was revealed in Thuringia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg is, of course, not an east-German problem alone. The authorities had already comprehensively failed throughout Germany in pursuing the National Socialist Underground—in a series of crimes the extent and circumstances of which have not been clarified even yet by the judiciary. The far-right riot in 2018 in Chemnitz and the strikingly circuitous dismissal of the head of domestic state security triggered a learning process everywhere in the country. As the hesitant proceedings against far right networks in the armed forces, police and security agencies show, the first signs of an infiltration of core institutions of the democratic state are not just a matter for east Germany alone.

The fact is that this recent development was preceded in the east German *Länder* by a spate of outbreaks of violence from the far right, unhindered Nazi parades and disturbing cases of politically preoccupied prosecution. The brutal and often life-threatening cases of rightist violence were already bad enough: the ‘mob chase of Mügeln’ (in Saxony) of a group of (eight) Indians in 2007, or in the following year the excesses of the ‘Storm’ fraternity which wanted to create in and around Dresden ‘national liberated zones’, or a year before the end of the NSU the arson attacks and car chases by the thugs of Limbach-Oberfrohna, or in 2015 the attacks by more than 1,000 massed people against a refugee shelter in Heidenau, or the similar disinhibition of a xenophobic mob in Freital and Clausnitz.

But even worse were the reactions on the part of the state: a police force which advises victims not to take out proceedings; a biased court which recognises no difference between attackers and victims; a domestic intelligence service which subtly differentiates between behaviour ‘critical towards asylum’ and that ‘hostile towards asylum’; the federal prosecutor having to remove a state prosecutor’s office from a scandalous terrorism case because, despite the obvious group connections of the accused, it could only identify individual perpetrators; or the office that orders up such scant numbers of

police officers for a pre-announced demonstration that participants in the inevitable riots could not even be proceeded against. If I then go on to read that in these eastern regions a ‘silent acceptance of right-wing violence’ is spreading, then I do feel reminded of a ‘Weimarian’ state of affairs.¹

SIX
ONE FRONTLINE, TWO VIEWPOINTS

Yet the Thuringian affair did not just delineate a political frontline running right through the population in both east and west: alongside this new shared experience, the affair made clear the different viewpoints from which people perceive a common conflict because of their different histories, political experiences and learning processes. All the same, this emerged much more clearly on one side than on the other.

Whereas, locally in the east, ideas about the political substance behind the concept of '*bürgerlich*' or 'middle-class' mentality had to be sorted out first, reactions in the west reflected a legacy inherited from the old federal republic. The fact that the Thuringian government crisis dragged on for weeks, even after the resignation of the state premier who had been elected thanks to the AfD,

was a farcical double-bind in which the CDU parliamentary group was marooned only because it was forced by its federal chair (who came from the Saarland) to stick to the incompatibility of any coalition with either left or right. How could Mike Mohring (CDU leader in Thuringia) help the left-wing minority cabinet into the saddle without dirtying his hands by breaching the required ‘equidistance’? The party nominee for chancellor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, had dug her own grave, with her mantra-like repetition of ‘neither one nor the other’—which, given the person of Bodo Ramelow, the worthy Christian trade unionist from Hesse (and Left party state premier), proved wholly unrealistic. It was most truly a ‘pretty rich’ piece of western history which ran head-on into current realities in the east.

The western CDU, which had plastered its election posters from the very first federal elections with denunciations of Herbert Wehner (social-democrat party general secretary) and the SPD under the slogan ‘all roads lead to Moscow’, still found it hard to say a long overdue goodbye to a moralistic discrimination against leftists—a discrimination which had long worked as the prophylactic antithesis of an obvious historical discrimination towards the far right in light of the Nazi period. In the old federal republic, for the CDU the symmetrical moral devaluation of right and left (a symmetry which during

the cold war had even received academic blessing in the guise of the theory of totalitarianism) had been an important programmatic building-block *en route* to becoming a natural majority party. In the geo-political constellation of the cold war, the first federal chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, used an anti-communist front to bind in the old Nazi elites which had preserved or won back their old positions in virtually all administrative functions, armed with the feeling of always having been on the right side.¹

In fact, in those days anti-communism enabled large parts of the population which had supported Hitler right up to the bitter end by an overwhelming majority to evade any self-critical coming to terms with their own enmeshment in his crimes. The ‘communicative refusing to mention’ one’s own past behaviour facilitated an apparently co-operative adaptation to the new democratic order—an opportunism which, naturally, proved all the easier to sustain with growing living standards and under the nuclear umbrella of the US.

This dubious success was so embedded in the Christian-democrat party’s DNA that, decades later, in the 1994 federal elections, its general secretary, Peter Hinze, could play the anti-communist card once more in the form of his now almost legendary ‘red socks campaign’. An elec-

torate in the east that had always been overwhelmingly sceptical in its attitude towards the rule of the communist SED should thereby be kept in line. But by that time the revolutionary slogan directed against the party dictatorship, 'We are the people', had long morphed into 'We are *a* people'. As early as the first free East-German parliamentary elections of March 1990, when GDR market squares were submerged from the west in waves of spotless, black-red-gold national flags, one saw the national issue move centre stage. Even then the emancipatory citizens' movement frayed at the margin towards the right, egged on by neo-Nazi cadres who had come over from the west.² During 40 years of an anti-fascism dictated from above, the GDR could never have enjoyed the type of public discussion which, like a *Leitmotiv*, is woven into the history of the old federal republic.

SEVEN
POLICY TOWARDS THE PAST IN THE OLD
FEDERAL REPUBLIC

Only these strident disputes, often carried out in unruly fashion between the generations, explain why, in the 'Bonn republic', the initially widespread opportunistic adaptation to a political order introduced by the victor powers more or less changed over the decades into a principled commitment to the normative foundations of the constitutional state. However, the constant flare-up of confrontations over what the historian Ernst Nolte called a 'past that will not go away' made this anything but a surefire success. They were ignited directly after the Nazi period came to an end by controversies about the Nuremberg trials of crimes against humanity or about books such as those by Eugen Kogon (camp survivor/historian) or Günther Weisenborn (in the Nazi resistance). But as a result of the rapid rehabilitation of the old Nazi

eites and a population released from the anti-communist spirit of the times, they were then extinguished. So, they had to be revived again and again from the oppositional margins, against a tidal mentality of repression and normalisation.

After a decade of silence, at the end of the 1950s came the first initiatives on the 'reappraisal of the past', as Theodor Adorno put it. In Ludwigsburg the central agency for the prosecution of Nazi crimes was set up after the first of the trials took place in Ulm. At the same time, members of the SDS (Socialist German Students' Union), against the advice of the SPD leadership, organised an exhibition on 'unatoned Nazi justice' which provoked great controversy. But it was not until the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, set in motion by Fritz Bauer (a Jewish judge/prosecutor), that any of this gained nationwide attention. Despite the mild judgments handed down, nobody could ignore Auschwitz any more.

Looking back, the historian Ulrich Herbert states, adopting one of the few emphatic phrases in his important *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert*: 'That, despite millions of victims of Nazi policies, the members of the Nazi elites and even the mass murderers from the security police and SD [security service] escape by and large almost unscathed and in part even live in privileged

positions as respected citizens, was such a great scandal, fundamentally contradicting every concept of political morality, that it could not remain without serious and protracted consequences for this society, its internal structures and overseas image. For decades and right up to the present 21st century it comes over, despite all the successes in building a stable democracy, as a mark of Cain for this Republic.’¹

The focus on justice was only the core element of this intellectual coming to terms with the past, which sweeps over the angry or resistant parts of the populace in a series of waves. These controversies are drawn in ever broader circles until the international response to Willy Brandt, the social-democrat chancellor, kneeling at a monument to the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw in 1970 gives to this focal theme a new, political dimension, while the emotionally staged fate of the Weiss family set out in the film *Holocaust* (1979 when it was shown in Germany) resonates across the whole of society. This at the end of the most restless decade in the domestic politics of the old federal republic, led of course by the student protest which since 1967 had come to a head. Part of an international movement, it took on a specific accent because the younger generation for the first time openly confronted their Nazi parents and publicly excoriated the involvement of Nazi personnel who had been allowed to

return to office. But even '1968' had its own pre-history: historians have since drawn attention to numerous political debates and initiatives which accompanied, from the late 1950s, protest movements against nuclear rearmament and emergency laws.²

Yet this *Leitmotiv*, recalled in catchwords, of constantly renewed calls to 'never forget' would scarcely have been woven into a self-evident culture of remembrance, indeed the official political identity of the republic. The theme would presumably have disappeared with the controversies and fights of the excitable 1970s, which Herbert Marcuse ironically dubbed 'Revolt and counter-revolt', if one had not interposed, after the 1983 change of government, the forced politics of history set out by Kohl under the aegis of a so-called 'moral turn'.

Kohl's attempts at 'dethematising the Nazi period' (Herbert) did not end with the highly symbolic meetings with Mitterrand in Verdun and the US president, Ronald Reagan, in Bitburg, nor with his similarly clumsy efforts to try to influence the American plans for the Holocaust Museum in Washington by way of voicing 'national German interest'.³ It was much more the case that further initiatives, such as the founding of a national museum of German history, should imbue the popula-

tion with a proud sense of identity drawn from national history in its entirety.

But the speech by Richard von Weizsäcker on the 40th anniversary of the end of the war put a spoke in the wheel. At least a broad swath of public opinion was impressed by the link the federal president made between the unsparingly detailed naming of individual groups of victims murdered in the concentration camps on the one hand and the definition of May 8th 1945 as 'Liberation Day' on the other. This redefinition stood in deliberate contrast to how the bulk of contemporaries had subjectively experienced that day.

In the two years thereafter, the so-called Historians' Dispute erupted, with the attempt by Nolte to relativise the Holocaust by referring to Stalin's crimes. Against the background of Kohl's politics of history, the quarrel was ultimately about two things: first, the significance that 'Auschwitz' and the murder of Europe's Jews should acquire in the political memory of the German population and, second, the relevance of this self-critical remembrance of the Nazi past for the sustained identification of citizens with the constitution of their democratic state and, more generally, with a liberal way of life shaped by mutual recognition of the right to 'otherness'. And yet, at that time, it still remained undecided whether

this commitment would be cemented as the core element of how the federal republic's citizens should see themselves.

The firm anchoring of this consciousness in civil society—which today finds exemplary expression in the words and behaviour of a federal president like Frank-Walter Steinmeier—is due first of all to the impassioned policy debates around history in the 1990s. I'm talking here about the unending chain of public reactions: the provocative book by Daniel Goldhagen on normal Germans as *Hitler's Willing Executioners* of the Holocaust; the writer Martin Walser's 1998 speech accepting the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, in which he disparaged 'this permanent show of our shame', and its spontaneous contradiction by the then chair of the Jewish Central Council, Ignaz Bubis; the roving exhibition organised by Jan-Phillip Reemtsma's institute on the (until then) widespread denial of *Wehrmacht* crimes in the war of destruction against 'Jewish Bolshevism', and finally the building of Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, which in the meantime Kohl himself had instigated.

These discussions were in their momentum and range incomparable with anything in the past. They caused deep rifts but were in a sense of a final nature: up till now, in any official commemoration ceremonies, the

commitment to democracy and the rule of law is not just sworn in an abstract manner but much more ceremonially affirmed as the result of a difficult learning process—as the ever-conscious self-critical remembrance of crimes against humanity for which we, as postwar German citizens, bear no guilt, but for which we are nevertheless liable and carry historic responsibility (as Karl Jaspers unequivocally spelt out to his fellow countrymen and women, as early as 1946, in *The Question of German Guilt*).

In other respects, these discussions all the same brought no closure: given a completely new situation, the learning process must continue, because one suggestion that held sway in the old republic has proven to be false in the last few years. Those convictions and motives, upon which the Nazi regime drew, no longer belong to a past that one can count by the intervening years: they have returned with the radical wing of the AfD—up to and including its phraseology—to the democratic everyday.

After the debates on the Nazi past carried out during the 1960s, 70s and 80s the final wave stretched even into the first post-reunification decade—and yet remained more or less a matter for the west.⁴ That was true for the initiators, public speakers and participants in these debates and can be shown *inter alia* by the geographic distribution of towns in which the ‘*Wehrmacht*’ exhibition between

1995 and 1999 attracted some 900,000 visitors. This kind of selectivity in participation requires no explanation, given the anti-fascism prescribed from above for over 40 years in the east; and, certainly, it is no ground for criticism because of the completely different history of coming—or rather not coming—to terms with the Nazi past in the GDR. In the days after 1989-90 the population in the east had moreover to cope with problems reaching deep into everyday life, which the west barely noted and of which it had no inkling itself.

EIGHT
THE ABSENCE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN
GDR TIMES—AND THEREAFTER

Even so, I do mention this asymmetry because it points to a very relevant circumstance: the east German populace had neither before 1989 nor afterwards access to their own public sphere, in which conflicting groups could have staged debates on identity. Because in 1945 one dictatorship followed another (if of a quite different kind),¹ there was no real place in the decades thereafter for a spontaneous, self-started, painstaking clarification of a shattered political consciousness, similar to what happened in the west. That is a deficit, arising through no fault of their own, whose consequences I cannot estimate.

I am an equally poor judge of for which parts of the population explanations of the psychotherapist Annette

Simon, daughter of novelist Christa Wolf, hold true when she speaks of how the party-ordered, anti-fascist identity had a strong influence. This was, she said, 'because it offered comprehensive exculpation from German crimes ... Everything that was further internalised post-1945 in terms of psychic dispositions, of susceptibility to submission, authoritarian thinking, scorn for the foreign and the weak, was never publicly processed apart from in art and literature. In institutions and families there was the same silence as originally in the west. So there was a cover-up of what happened pre-1945 concretely at this particular university or that particular hospital or in this or that family. The bulk of east Germans were forced into an ideology by the Russian victors and their helpmates in Pankow or Wandlitz. If one accepted this ideology that was accompanied at first by terror and later by dictatorship, this double knot made of socialism and anti-fascism, then one could apparently be freed of any guilt and abandon any sense of German-ness.'²

This analysis concerns first of all the absence until 1989 of any public sphere which might have enabled an open controversy among east-German citizens about how they should understand themselves as the heirs of a burdened past. The situation is quite different when it comes to a further and understandable socio-psychological symptom

for which Simon cites other research—the shame about adapting to the expectations and impositions of the communist system to which one had meekly given in. That concerns the non-existent public sphere *post-1989*. At that time, the public sphere in the federal republic was opened up for its new citizens but they were denied their very own public sphere. So there was no shielded space for the overdue clarification and coming to terms with one's past and present, for a process which would not be prejudiced by prevailing opinion from 'over there'—the one that always knows best: 'This old, often unconscious and suppressed shame about the GDR era in which one more than absolutely necessary bowed to constraint, is now being brought to light in a range of ways. And, in the harsh light of public opinion and under the west's spotlight, it amounts to a new humiliation and devaluation. As an example, one might refer to the handling of GDR anti-fascism which frequently was construed as anti-fascism without any participants.'³

In this case it is the reunification process itself which has not just liberalised the press and TV in the east but attached it to the infrastructure of the west-German public sphere. The citizens of the former GDR did not get to enjoy their own public sphere. One could say they were 'dispossessed' of their own media if there had been

up till then any free public sphere. That was not just true of the snaffled-up media enterprises but also of the personnel without which one's 'own' public sphere cannot function. The west-German press, that is to say, took care of the effective liquidation of east-German writers and intellectuals, whose words had articulated and reflected everyday GDR experiences up to that point. In the old republic they were still honoured and even celebrated literarily but in the reunified state Stefan Heym, Wolf, Heiner Müller and all the others now no longer counted as the left-wingers they were but as the intellectual water-carriers (*'domestiques'*) of the Stasi regime—which they had not been. Neither could the oppositional intellectuals from among the ranks of the civil-rights activists take their place.

Klaus Wolfram, who was removed from his academic post in 1977 and sent to a factory, later belonged to the New Forum leadership. In December 1989 he founded the critical newspaper *The Other* but it failed to get off the ground for longer periods and finally closed in 1992. In a November 2019 speech, with which he sharply divided his audience of eastern and western members of the Berlin Academy of Arts, he also bemoaned the immediate 'destruction of the home-based public media ... Two years after 1990 there was in east Germany not a single TV station, no radio station and hardly any news-

paper with a developed reader-paper connectivity that that did not have a west-German editor-in-chief at the top. The general debate, political consciousness, social memory, all the self-identification which an entire population had just won for itself, was transformed into discouragement and instruction.’⁴

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COUNTS NOW

What, at first glance, seems little more than a partial aspect of converting the economy to capitalistic, competitive structures in reality gets to the heart of a political culture which came out of the Nazi period with a completely different profile. In this 'takeover' of a sensitive communicational interweave which, even at its best, was thoughtless, the naivety of the assumption which generally guided the federal government in the triumphal confirmation of its anti-communism came to light. This naivety was given legal expression in the choice of the constitutional path of a 'reunification' with the (as yet non-existent) eastern *Länder* via article 23 of the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law). This article was originally customised for the entry to West Germany of the Saarland which in 1949 had only been separated for four years—so that

then, as was swiftly confirmed, one was allowed to infer an ‘accumulated’ national connection between the two sides. That, decades later, in the case of reunification, one started from the same premiss reflected a perhaps understandable but deceptive wave of national feeling—quite apart from the fact that this entry route took away the possibility for citizens east and west to create a common tradition, by preparing in catch-up a shared constitution and thereby building the sustained political consciousness of an intended merger.

It was the concurrence of Kohl’s 12-point plan with the will of a majority of the GDR populace that, with the result of the elections to the *Volkskammer* (the East-German parliament) of March 1990, rendered irreversible the decision to pursue the earliest possible reunification—a decision that was logical on foreign-policy grounds as well. The Round Table (a forum for SED bodies and civil-rights movements), with its initiative for another type of unification, was not brushed aside by the west alone.

Meanwhile, there is substantial literature on the mistakes made in the rough manner with which elite western functionaries took control in all areas of GDR life.¹ The well-known fact that, even after three decades, there is still a lack of east-German experts on the economy, politics and

civil service is symptomatic of this. But, one way or the other, with the decision to opt for the ‘fast route’, a ‘robust’ transition to functioning in line with west-German social systems became unstoppable. With that, the GDR intellectuals and that part of the citizens’ rights movement that would have liked to overthrow the communist SED regime with the vague goal of creating another, ‘better’ GDR² simply became marginalised. Of course, there could have been a greater amount of thoughtful reticence on the part of the west, even in the conditions for a democratically chosen ‘*Anschluss*’. In any case, the GDR populace would have merited greater space for acting autonomously—if only because that way it might have been able to make its own mistakes. And, above all, there was no available public space for any process of coming to terms with a doubly burdening past.

But these are counter-factual reflections that merely concern the missed opportunities of the last few decades and no longer serve a political purpose today. However, today’s exceptional situation, in a German perspective, offers a new opportunity for reaching a twin unity, at the German as well as the European level. There are now, as we have seen, two complementary developments happening in the federal republic. On one hand, reciprocal sensitivity to and understanding of historical differ-

ences—and thus differences not of one's own making in the character of political mentalities—have increased in east and west. On the other hand and at the same time, the political significance of a conflict now taken seriously and even accepted by the political establishment has become clear.

The AfD is fomenting a conflict which may well have arisen out of the asymmetric costs of German unification but is now newly orchestrated as a mirror-image rejection of European integration in nationalistic and racist language. This conflict gains its special relevance in our context, because it has today taken on a pan-German character: it no longer runs along the divisive geographical borders of different historical fates but along those of party preference instead. The clearer the nationwide shared contours of this conflict become, the greater the prospect that the confrontation with far-right populism now going on across Germany as a whole will hasten the already recognised historical distancing from the failings of the unification process—and, what's more, the awareness that increasingly other problems are coming to the fore which we can solve only by acting together in both Germany and Europe, in a world turned more authoritarian and strife-torn.

This shuffling of the political cards can be seen as an opportunity to complete the process of German unification, by gathering together our national forces for the decisive step in integrating Europe. Let's face it: without European unification we will not overcome the unforeseeable economic consequences so far of the pandemic nor the right-wing populism at home and in the other member states of the EU.

NOTES

1. Introduction

1. Luuk van Middelaar (2016), *Vom Kontinent zur Union*, Berlin, pp 299ff.
2. There is still no common political will for a truly European shared perspective on the shape of things to come. As for criticism of the half-hearted nature of the Brussels compromise, see the proposals from the head of Kiel's Institute of the World Economy, Gabriel Felbermayr, 'Was die EU für die Bürger leisten sollte', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 7th 2020.

3. The turning-point in German policy towards Europe

1. Ashoka Mody (2018), *Eurotragedy: A Drama in Nine Acts*, Oxford University Press
2. Wolfgang Schäuble, 'Aus eigener Stärke', *FAZ*, July 6th 2020

4. AfD at the interface of the European/German unification process

1. Whatever feelings then may have been still in play, west Germans (according to their age) can mouth the now usual phrase of the 'happy' event of reunification for personal reasons, because this reminds them of the sheer happenstance of their place of birth and has brought to light comparative life stories which they could

live out with the deep satisfaction that their less-favoured countrymen and women would at least get the chance of some poetic justice.

5. The shock of Erfurt is an all-German problem

1. See the impressive book *Der Riss: Wie die Radikalisierung im osten unser Zusammenleben zerstört* (Berlin, 2020), pp 61, 72ff, 135ff, 145ff, 166ff and 209ff. In it the journalist Michael Kraske reports on the details of such cases without any hint of west-German arrogance. He pays tribute to the courage of east Germans who freed themselves on their own from a repressive regime and to the impositions and insults they faced from the start of the historic change in 1990. He also does not forget to point out that the leadership of the right-wing cadres which initially gave the indigenous scene its organising potential came out of the west.

6. One frontline, two viewpoints

1. Axel Schildt (2017), 'Anti-communism from Hitler to Adenauer', in Norbert Frei and Dominik Rigoll (eds), *Anti-communism in its Era*, Göttingen, pp 186-203
2. Kraske, *op cit*, p57

7. Policy towards the past in the old federal republic

1. Ulrich Herbert (2017), *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, p667
2. Michael Frey (2020), *Vor Achtundsechzig*, Göttingen, pp 199ff
3. Jacob S Eder (2020), *Holocaust-Angst*, Göttingen

4. That may not be true to the same extent for the asylum-rights debate following the Balkan wars. In the context of asylum-seekers' refuges burnt down as much in the west as in the east, the collapsing illusion 'We're not an immigration country' became the topic of the dispute.

8. The absence of the public sphere in GDR times—and thereafter

1. From the normative viewpoint of the rule of law a recently published investigation is interesting for differentiating between the two systems: Inga Markovits (2019), *Diener zweier Herrn: DDR-Juristen zwischen Recht und Macht*, Berlin; see the review by Uwe Wesel in *FAZ*, July 28th 2020.
2. Annette Simon (2019), 'Wut schlägt Scham', in *Blätter*, October, p43ff
3. *ibid*, p43
4. *Berliner Zeitung*, April 6th 2020.

9. What's still lacking and what counts now

1. Two very different recent historical contributions: Norbert Frei, Franka Maubach, Christina Morina and Mark Tändler (2019), *Zur rechten Zeit*, Berlin; Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (2019), *Die Übernahme*, Munich
2. 'Diese Reise hin zu etwas, das wir noch finden wollten' conjured up and lamented today by Thomas Oberender (2020), *Empowerment Ost*, Stuttgart

