

THE DIFFICULT PATH TO UNITY: EAST GERMAN MENTALITIES AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION AFTER 1990

Symposium at the GHI, October 3, 2002. Convener: Bernd Schäfer (GHI).
Speakers: Joachim Gauck (Berlin), James D. Bindenagel (Washington,
D.C.).

One might think that October 3 as the “Day of German Unity” is an uncontroversial day in contemporary German history. Remembering the joyous 1990 unification and subsequent merger of the two German states established under post-1945 Cold War divisions, the celebration of such a day might by now have become rather routine. Germans being Germans, however, memory was soon clouded by the increasing economic, social, and psychological burdens of unification in both former parts of the country. Therefore, in Germany itself, October 3 has turned into a highly compartmentalized day of celebration on which the Federal Republic’s political elite solemnly gathers in one of the state capitals to search their souls about the still unsatisfactory “inner unification.” Servicing people in the Washington area interested in such issues, the German Historical Institute strives to commemorate this day with reflections by prominent speakers on Germany’s “state of the nation.”

In 2002 Joachim Gauck, the former “Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security of the former GDR” and one of the few people in Germany after whom an agency—the so-called “Gauck-Behörde”—has been named (albeit unofficially), lectured to a large audience about “The Difficult Path to Unity” and East German mentalities. He spoke and sometimes preached to highly attentive, almost spellbound listeners, given his eminent oratorical skills developed in decades of Protestant ministry in the former GDR.

Before discussing German unification, the speaker talked about the preceding loss of freedom on the side of the East Germans. How they regained that freedom by taking their grievances and frustrations to the streets of the GDR in fall 1989 was narrated by Joachim Gauck in an impressive manner. He wondered whether anybody in the western world could imagine what it meant to motivate people who were captives of fear throughout their lives to become politically active and take the risk involved in confronting the authorities of a menacing state apparatus. Gauck repeated a line from one of his public speeches to 8,000 people in his Rostock church in October 1989 and related how he agonized over pronouncing these words: “We say good-bye to our fear” (Wir sagen

unserer Angst "Auf Wiedersehen"). For himself and many friends in the GDR, he confessed to have learned from Vaclav Havel "the power of the powerful derives from the weakness of the powerless." The speaker stressed the importance of fully grasping this truth and defining the real situation in a dictatorship. With the increasing flight of younger people to the West in summer of 1989, the repressed population in the GDR had finally realized this dictatorial pattern and began to overcome their weakness. In fall 1989, people said farewell to fear, went into the streets, and shouted "We are the people," according to Gauck, in fact saying "We have entered into a new role that we haven't practiced thus far."

People in the GDR had been incapacitated, denied any real participation or emancipation in the political realm. Therefore, the fall of 1989 was a period of empowerment for the people. They regained self-consciousness: "I am something, I am a citizen, we are the people." Utilizing their new power, an overwhelming majority of people in East Germany longed for rapid reunification with West Germany, where everything seemed to be superior to the GDR and nearly picture-perfect. They didn't want to wait a lifetime for another experiment of social reform or revolution, but opted for what they perceived as the almost infallible model of success from the prosperous Western part of the country. Unification, however, soon brought about another period of tutelage. The Eastern victors of history in 1989/90, who had become masters of their fate when overthrowing the communist rulers, suddenly had to realize their demotion to "apprentices under Helmut Kohl." The feeling of having to learn a completely new and different system of society, economy, and culture furthered a second consecutive alienation from "the system." "Liberation does not mean liberty": Many people in the former GDR, according to Gauck, have no desire to become citizens of a civil society, but reproduce and nourish a feeling of powerlessness. The speaker considered such fatalism dangerous in the long run, and he estimated the timeline of mental transformation from dictatorship to democracy at four to five decades. Intellectual knowledge might not be a substitute for deficiencies in mentality.

Gauck argued that Germany had a weak tradition of liberation movements compared to extensive periods of voluntary obedience and political subservience. The East German revolution of 1989 had the potential of establishing pride among East Germans, just as the post-1945 success story of democracy did for the West Germans. An emancipated German nation could draw from this pride to establish self-reliance and avoid neurosis. Maybe Germans could then respond to foreign immigration more calmly, acknowledge and accept different opinions, and enter debate in an engaged and civilized style. Joachim Gauck wanted to give Germany all these wishes on October 3, 2002.¹

In his comments, Ambassador James D. Bindenagel, an “old German hand” of the State Department who served in the U.S. embassies of Bonn and East Berlin in the eighties and nineties and recently acted as U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, recalled the November 1989 events from his personal memory when he was stationed in the GDR. He continued by outlining the emergence of the new Germany as a “Berlin Republic” over the last decade, characterized by such landmark decisions as German participation in international military missions and agreeing to compensation for forced laborers from the Nazi era. Without hiding his irritation with some of the political rhetoric in the 2002 German electoral campaign, Bindenagel wondered about future irrationalities of a “special German way.” He ended, though, on an optimistic note that Germans would live up to their international responsibilities.

Bernd Schäfer

Note

¹ The full German text of Joachim Gauck’s lecture from October 3, 2002 can be accessed on the GHI website at www.ghi-dc.org.