

GERMAN UNIFICATION SYMPOSIUM
JENS REICH, "MY GERMANY: REFLECTIONS ON MY
COUNTRY BEFORE AND AFTER 1989"

Symposium at the GHI, October 3, 2003. Convener: Bernd Schaefer (GHI).
Speaker: Jens Reich (Max Delbrück Center, Berlin). Sponsored by E. ON
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In convening its third "German Unification Symposium" on October 3, the "Day of German Unity," the German Historical Institute now appears to have established this event as a tradition. The featured speaker for 2003 was Jens Reich, one of the leaders of the GDR citizens' movement in 1989-1990, and together with Bärbel Bohley the most prominent face of "Neues Forum" during those months. After serving as a delegate for "Bündnis 90" in the GDR's first, and last, freely elected parliament of 1990, Reich left politics after German unification and returned to his profession as a molecular biologist. Nonetheless he continued to deliver public speeches and to write widely noticed essays in books and major newspapers. He even briefly ran a well-received "campaign" for Germany's federal presidency in 1994 after having been jointly endorsed by the youth organizations of the SPD, FDP, and the Greens.

By coming to Washington to deliver the lecture at the GHI's German Unification Symposium, Reich returned to the place of his "biggest success as an orator," as he noted in his introductory remarks. As one of the very few English-speaking East German dissidents, in early 1990 he had accepted an invitation by the German Marshall Fund and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies to come to Washington as a representative of the GDR's citizens' movement, which had just toppled a dictatorial regime and facilitated the end of German division. During this initial visit, Reich spoke to a large audience of several hundred people. He was so overwhelmed by his first trip to the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall that he exclaimed, "Hail to you, inhabitants of a distant star!" Returning to the American capital more than thirteen years later, he now expressed sovereign familiarity with the globalized world. One constant remained, however: Again he spoke in front of a packed auditorium, one of the largest crowds the GHI has hosted for a lecture. Among the listeners were many who had attended his 1990 Washington speech.

Briefly reflecting on the enthusiasm of 1989/90 in East Germany and Central Europe, Reich credited the "nameless members of the public who actually did not want anything to do with politics" for causing the downfall of incompetent and repressive communist regimes all across the former Warsaw Pact territory. The speaker then shifted to personal re-

marks about his life in the GDR. He defined the GDR as his and his family's "*Heimat*," but stated unequivocally that he "felt no emotional tie to this state, no sense of gratitude, no sense of belonging," and described his decision to enter a rather non-ideological profession in the area of natural sciences as an "arrangement." Otherwise he retreated into "inner emigration," but beneath the surface he felt depressed over "what I saw as my stolen life." Thus "the wonderful year 1989" had brought his "release from the cage" and "personal liberation," the desired return "to the Germany of our common language, culture, and history," and to the Europe his mother had talked about enthusiastically while he was growing up in the GDR.

Musing about the ensuing difficulties turning liberation into a process of renewal in East Germany and Eastern Europe, Reich admonished that this should make us realize "what a difficult process 'nation-building' is." In regions with different traditions with "no hint of self-liberation," such a task would be hard to accomplish in a rush or by outside arrangement. For Central and Eastern Europe, and for Germany itself, Reich nonetheless expressed his optimism that "things are going to turn out well" as long as they are embedded in the major framework of an expanded European Union.

In terms of foreign policy engagement, Reich took exception with current trends in his country, and advocated a "modest range" of German involvement even during times of globalization. Describing the FRG as a "medium-sized power," he warned against stretching limited military capabilities too far, and advised the country to focus on establishing political stability in the immediate vicinity of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. This way, Germany could respond to recent American attempts to differentiate between "Old Europe" and "New Europe" along rather arbitrary lines. Accepting different priorities on the part of Germany as a medium-sized power and of the United States as a military superpower would soften clumsy reproaches of "cowardice" on the one hand and adventurist "lust for world domination" on the other.

Reich concluded by emphasizing his emotional ties to the United States. In his view, three factors had been indispensable in achieving German unification peacefully: non-violence on the side of East German protesters; Gorbachev holding power in Moscow; and the unconditional support of the United States, in contrast to most countries of Western Europe. The latter is even more remarkable, according to Reich, since Washington acted not only for reasons of self-interest, but unmistakably displayed an emotional element when firmly embracing German unification. "In the defense of our freedom against totalitarian and terrorist threats," the speaker confessed, he will stand on the side of the United States. However, he expressed uncertainty about what form this defense

should take, and expressed his hope that the U.S. would find a way to bring peace to the world “without turning into an aging Roman Empire.” Ending his reflections by mentioning his son’s family, which has settled on the American East Coast, with his two grandchildren now U.S. citizens, Jens Reich expressed his sincere wish that all goes well for the United States, and that friendship between Germany and America will be preserved and defended.

In his comments, Bernd Schaefer drew on his personal experiences with a rather frustrated Jens Reich in late 1990, noting that it was “good news” when an eminent intellectual like Reich was confident that things would turn out well for post-1990 Germany and Eastern Europe. As reassuring as it was to listen to Reich’s remarks on European and transatlantic currents, Schaefer characterized as worrisome the application of lessons from post-communist Europe to the present Middle East. Taking October 3 as a day of reflection on “nation-building,” Schaefer mused about the direction of imperial United States foreign policy and the willingness of the U.S. to follow up on its commitments. Similarly, Germany’s tendency to turn toward introspection and to ignore the need for reform in the Middle East is equally unhelpful. The wealth of common values between the U.S. and Germany would be better preserved by working together than by playing primarily to domestic audiences for political gain.

Bernd Schaefer

The full text of Jens Reich’s lecture can be accessed on the GHI website at www.ghi-dc.org/reich_txt_2003.html.