1990: AN EPOCHAL BREAK IN GERMAN HISTORY?

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Lectures given on the Day of German Unity provide an opportunity to take stock of research on the recent past. As we all know, nothing is as changeable as the past, and as our distance from the “Miracle of 1989” and the surprising end of Germany’s division grows, our perspective on events of nearly a generation ago is continuously shifting. Perhaps the most important consideration when representing the past and trying to make sense of it concerns the division in the flow of time into separate units and the weighing of continuity and change. Therefore, the core question of my talk today is this: does October 3, 1990, represent a break between two eras or even, as people at the time thought, the defining moment of the twentieth century and its turn to a new century?

Historical epochs, as the historian Gustav Droysen noted 150 years ago, are only conventions. Betrachtungsformen in his language, by which he meant that epochs are points of view, imposed by historians, not attributes of the world and of the past itself. The search for turning points in modernity, with its linear conception of time, stems from the desire to impose order on the continuous flow of time. It is not only the guests in Thomas Mann’s “Magic Mountain” who are reluctant to acknowledge, and I quote Hans Castorp, the novel’s protagonist, that time has “no sense of goals, segments, measurements” and wish that the clock might stop “for a moment or at least give some tiny signal that something had been accomplished.”¹ In the experience of political ruptures, military decisions, and social revolutions, the succession of epochs in human history becomes visible along with a glimpse of the future. On September 20, 1792, Goethe tried to cheer up a group of Prussian officers who were despondent and desperate after the Prussian-Austrian forces’ defeat by the army of French volunteers at Chalons-sur-Mère. “From here today, a new era in world history begins,” he told them, “and you can say that you were present.”²

In the following reflections I will, first, make a case for the thesis that 1990 was indeed a historical turning point; in the second section, I

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will then challenge this thesis; and, finally, I will shift the question from history to historiography.

I. 1990: A Self-Evident Break between Eras

The claim that 1990 marks a break between two eras is not simply an empirically derived fact, but rests on contemporary and later interpretation. Nevertheless, there are strong arguments to support the thesis that 1990 represents an indisputable break between two eras. All the signs of historical upheaval were evident in this epochal year. First, there was the rapidly growing force and acceleration of events that, in a matter of months, days, or even hours, brought about changes in conditions that had been immobile and impervious to change for years or even decades. In early 1989, Erich Honecker was in a position to say that the Berlin Wall would still be standing in fifty years, a hundred years if the reasons for its existence had not yet been eliminated. Later that year, the Wall was reduced to dust by souvenir hunters.

The fact that the caesura of 1990 transformed Germany into a nation state with secure and politically unchallenged borders after forty years of division, thereby finally relegating World War II to the past, suggests its epochal character even more strongly. The scope of the consequences of 1990, felt far beyond Germany, also attests to the importance of this turning point. It stands at the center of the world-historical upheaval of 1989/1991, which so surprisingly brought to an end the division of the world into two opposing camps — a division that had once been declared permanent. That upheaval signaled the end of the “century of ideology” and of the socialist experiment under Soviet dominance, and it seemed to have universalized the ideas of the West and the principles of freedom, the rule of law, and free market economics.

The field of contemporary history has gone along with this assessment of 1989/90 as an epochal turning point. Francis Fukuyama’s provocative contention that the end of the competition between the capitalist and the communist systems signaled the end of history was an overenthusiastic prophecy, which was soon quoted only by critics who rejected Fukuyama’s argument. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that 1990 saw not only the end of the division of Germany and of central Europe, but also of the Cold War, which had shaped the lives of people across the globe for forty years. The upheaval of 1989/1990

ended, as Hermann Weber noted, the “seventy-year history of German communism,” and transformed a radical counter-project to the bourgeois capitalist social order into a fixed historical entity. From 1990 on, the “central categories and structural defects” of the East German counter-project — for example, its radicalism, its orientation toward violence, its ideological rigidity, its intolerance, its faith in progress, and its obsession with power — can be discussed from a historical perspective, having lost their political power and partly even their political meaning.4

“1989/1990” stands for the end of a century-long epoch that is rapidly becoming more foreign to us with each passing year. This second “world of yesterday,” to borrow a phrase from Stefan Zweig, extends from 1917/1918 to 1989/1990 and encompasses the short twentieth century, a century of obsessive categorization, of radical inclusion and exclusion. It is the century of political faiths that take as their core the friend/enemy distinction Carl Schmitt envisioned. It is the century of all-encompassing solutions and of vast projects and visions for the redemption of humankind. It is the century, as Gerd Koenen put it, of “great songs.” It is the century of rival, mutually exclusive socio-political world orders, a century characterized, with varying degrees of intensity, by the formation of ideological camps but at the same time a century aware of the artificiality of this state of affairs.

The breaks that mark the beginning and end of this “age of extremes,” as Eric Hobsbawm dubbed it, correspond to one another. The “primordial catastrophe” of the First World War, with its apocalyptic violence and barbarism, destroyed the secular confidence in development, in tradition and progress, which were considered the characteristics of modernity. As a result of the war, the struggle for order in a contingent world became a hallmark of the twentieth century. Indeed, the desire for order became an obsession. At the end of this century, the long conflict between dictatorship and democracy, between fascism and communism, between totalitarianism and pluralism was brought to a close not by external force but rather by the internal collapse of the communist project. The central conflict of the twentieth century gave way to a new era in international politics and to new lines of division that created entirely new alliances and conflicts.

The era between the upheavals of 1917/1918 and 1989/1990, marked by competition between liberalism, fascism, and communism,
appears in hindsight to be the era of classical modernity. It defined its chiliastic projects as a “Third Reich” and a “new order,” both distinguished from the so-called “system period” of the Weimar Republic and Wall Street capitalism. At the end of the twentieth century the totalitarian experiments were no longer in existence. But the competing social models, the “free market” or “social market” systems, were in poor shape. In the Federal Republic of Germany, an unprecedented, incredibly radical restructuring of the social welfare system was being carried out against the backdrop of a loss of confidence in the policies of all political parties, which we experience more strongly every year, and which is generally not expressed in terms of socio-political critique, as it was in earlier times. The resulting political uncertainty did not follow ideological lines. The clear preference for uncharismatic politicians and for the confusion of a political landscape with more parties but fewer substantive options suggests that with the upheaval of 1989/1990 we entered into an uncertain post-ideological age. In this age, ideological systems are no longer in competition. Rather, confusing amalgamations have developed that can no longer be categorized as left or right or as progressive or reactionary.

Historians of contemporary Germany and Europe had to adjust to the end of European communism as a governing power. The end of communist rule opened new perspectives on the recent past, and it provided a seemingly obvious end point to historical developments. The appearance of an unpredicted and unforeseeable end point, in turn, challenged contemporary historians to rethink their understanding of the world from a new teleological perspective. East Germans who were adults at the time were deeply unsettled by the collapse of the socialist experiment and the East German states’ all-encompassing incorporation into the Western social order. The rapid, unopposed collapse of Socialist Unity Party (SED) rule in late 1989 and early 1990 was an extraordinary event in the most literal sense of the term. It exploded the framework of political thinking, it exceeded the public’s imagination, and it stultified the predictions of social scientists, above all in the field of GDR studies. A new generation of political scientists adopted this judgment and quickly learned to dismiss this failure with a shake of the head, explaining it away as the result of a regrettable moral indifference or of professional myopia or even blindness. But it was more. It would have been more appropriate to recognize that all of us — all of us who were active in scholarship or politics before and after 1989/1990 — were the fortunate victims of an upheaval of world historical significance that unfolded beyond

5 See the assessment of Gert-Joachim Glaeser, who stated in 1988: “In the 15 years of the Honecker era, the GDR has increased its international importance and inner stability.” Die DDR in der Ara Honecker. Politik — Kultur — Gesellschaft. (Opladen, 1988), 11. A year later the same author wrote that the GDR sought to “consolidate its achievements and to set the course for a crisis-free development of GDR society until the turn of the century. In this effort it can, not without reason, self-confidently take stock of the Honecker era.” Gert-Joachim Glaesier, Die andere deutsche Republik. Gesellschaft und Politik in der DDR (Opladen, 1989), 73. Even Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1989 reckoning with the “failed communist experiment” singled out the GDR as the sole Eastern bloc state that still had relative stability and the potential for economic development. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Das gescheiterte Experiment: Der Untergang der kommunistischen Systeme (Vienna, 1989), 239.
our political horizon. Historical ruptures like 1789 or 1989 create new thought horizons and vanishing points for historical thinking that we can celebrate, but that were not foreseeable from a scholarly perspective or from the experience of everyday life.

The world-historical rupture of 1989/1990 marks a turning point between eras in Germany and Europe because it abolished the previous order of things. It set new normative standards for thought and action that could not have developed under the previous circumstances. It created an inescapable point of view, a point of reference that quickly transformed the unforeseeable into the self-evidently normal. No one would any longer dispute the progressive decline of the East German economy, the terminal erosion of communism or the unnaturalness of Germany’s division. If we want to make the SED leadership look hopelessly ridiculous, we need only quote once again Erich Honecker’s January 1989 claim that the Berlin Wall would still be standing for a whole century. That this statement now strikes us as utterly absurd, but seemed entirely normal at the time, makes clear the epochal character of the break of 1989/1990 that still maintains its rank as an epochal turning point a quarter century later.

II. Relativizing the Break of 1990

Now let us consider the opposite argument. For decades, ”1990” has been understood as the surprising and fortunate end of an era of war, violence, and dictatorship. But the further we move away from the beginning of the twenty-first century, the clearer it becomes that this view is one-sided, that it does not correspond or no longer corresponds to reality. The master narrative of the twentieth century’s happy end has on closer examination turned out to be more of a romantic myth than a plausible interpretation.

Initially, the upheaval of 1990 was perhaps epochal, but it was a sectoral rather than a total turnaround. For Germany, it was first of all a political turning point, a turning point in the history of power and governance. Moreover, it was a turning point that affected only one-third of a soon-to-be enlarged Federal Republic, namely the so-called Beitrittsgebiet, the accession territory. In Bavaria or the Rhineland, for example, social and political life carried on virtually unchanged. We can also ask whether 1989/1990 really ranks as an epochal turning point on the international level or whether the events of the following years call into question the actual depth of the rupture. There is no question about Germany and its unification or reunification: no...
one, not even in Germany’s leftist party, seriously wants a return to the GDR, let alone to a communist dictatorship. But on the global level, the euphoric assumption of the early 1990s that the remaining communist countries would sooner or later turn into liberal, free market societies has been refuted by the tenacious survival of the communist regimes of North Korea, Cuba, and, above all, China. And all indications suggest that we are witnessing a cultural roll-back in Russia that invokes czarist imperial tradition but also honors Stalin as the father of the Soviet Union’s victory in the Great Patriotic War.

1990 also looks less significant as a turning point when we look closer to home. Many trends and developments in Germany’s recent past were completely unaffected by the upheaval in Eastern Europe. The creation of the information society with the digital revolution, the transformation of the education system, demographic change, and the critical expansion of the social welfare system are all developments that began before and in some cases long before 1989/1990. They were certainly affected by the events of the fall of 1989, but their general direction remained unchanged. “Unity” remains a success in the political sphere rather than in the social one, and October 3, the Day of German Unity, is still “more an official than a national holiday in character,” as recent accounts have stated.  

The often traumatic hardship experienced in Eastern Germany during the transition period still does not feature much in public consciousness; it is commonly ignored and only rarely finds articulation. It was only after twenty years, with the “Third Generation East,” composed of those who were children when the Wall came down, that the hardship of that period became a topic of discussion at all. It took twenty-five years before the first exhibition focusing on the shock of transformation and the pressure to adapt that eastern Germany experienced on the way to unity was organized. I am referring to the German Historical Museum’s 2015/16 exhibition “Unification: German Society in Transition” or, as it was titled in German, “Alltag Einheit,” which generated such strong public interest that it was extended for several more months in 2016.

Only with the benefit of distance will we be able to grasp the full scope of how rocky the road to internal unity was — and how often it led to a dead end. Only a few years later than eastern Germany, western Germany also saw its accustomed way of life fundamentally changed — in this case by globalization, digitalization, and the media revolution. Thus we can speak of intertwined turning points in a doubly divided

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history in many respects: as my colleague Frank Bösch has argued, after 1990 the neo-liberal transformation of socialist societies also led to delayed, staggered “co-transformations” in the West.9

Our growing temporal distance relativizes the break of 1990 in a much more fundamental way. Doubts have arisen not only about the extent of its reach but also, and more seriously, about the master narrative associated with it, about the interpretations of contemporary history bound up with that break. Those who experienced the upheavals of 1989/1990 saw them as a welcome end to the apocalyptic “century of extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm) and declared democracy the “surprise victor” in the competition between socio-political systems (Hans-Günter Hockerts). But, by the early twenty-first century, the writing was on the wall. Images of the celebration of German unification on October 3, 1990 suddenly stood in contrast to the images of horror from the attack on Western values on September 11, 2001. The threat of global terrorism that triggered a new sense of fear and vulnerability, the collapse of states in the Middle East, and the refugee flows that have tested Europe: All these developments indicate that the master narrative of 1990 as a fortunate ending is a story that is not entirely false, yet also not entirely accurate. Our beloved story of how we arrived at German unity has acquired the patina of venerability, and repeating it anew every October 3rd has become an empty ritual. For an increasing number of Germans, the 1990s’ promise of freedom has been transformed into the threatening prospect of unleashed and uncontrollable globalization. Behind the fallen border fences of the Cold War lurk financial crises and waves of migrants.

Looking back today, 1990 increasingly appears to have been both a happy end and a bad start. For October 3, 1990 led not only to the enlargement of the European Union on May 1, 2004, but also to the British vote to leave the EU on June 23, 2016. The opening of the East-West border created a new North-South barrier. The end of the Cold War made possible a renaissance of martial violence on the front steps of the Western world and at its very heart, in New York as in London, Paris, and Brussels. Many of the courageous citizens who took to the streets of Leipzig in the Monday Demonstrations of 1989 and shook off the yoke of communist rule were soon back on the streets to protest because they saw themselves as the losers in a society that was drifting apart. They believed that society gave them freedom but robbed them of security. And twenty-five years later, a considerable number of formerly courageous

citizens are using the epoch-making call for freedom first heard in 1989 to express hatred for all that is foreign and to demand that Germany seal itself off from the rest of the world. The declaration “We are the people!” — “Wir sind das Volk!” — lost its innocence when crowds shouted it outside of homes for asylum-seekers that had been set ablaze in Saxony and Mecklenburg. Behind the bright façade of the turning point of 1990, we now see a dark undercurrent, as political commentators have noted with irritation. As Europe found itself caught up in a refugee crisis in the summer of 2015, the Berlin newspaper Tagesspiegel ruminated: “Strangely enough, the fall of the Berlin Wall was not the beginning of freedom without borders but rather the starting point of a new era of fences.”

And in fact, the history of German unification and the end of Europe’s division is not solely a history of positive achievements. It is, at the same time, a history that has come with many burdens. The conflict in Ukraine and Russia’s annexation of Crimea raise the question whether, in the course of German unification and the Two-Plus-Four negotiations, the West had promised Moscow that NATO would not expand eastward. In 1990, the prospect of German dominance made Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand, and Giulio Andreotti firm opponents of German reunification, but in the end they were powerless to prevent it. In the past two years, first the Greek crisis and then the refugee crisis have again intensified resistance to Germany’s dominance in Europe, and we have all seen the many hostile cartoons of Chancellor Angela Merkel published in several countries of the EU.

Indeed, doesn’t the identity of today’s Federal Republic of Germany, built upon the happy end of the twentieth century, also have its darker side? The Germany of this year’s European crisis, the Germany, as Herfried Münkler put it earlier this year, that is “a hegemon highly vulnerable on account of its past”? Heinrich August Winkler has argued in even more emphatic terms. He warned of a German “special morality” and “self-singularization” in the refugee crisis that he attributes to Germans’ specific way of dealing with the burden of its past. Traces of this reading of the past can also be found in recent commentaries on the anniversary of the compassionate change in Germany’s refugee policy. Referring to the so-called historical lesson Germany had learned, and thus implicitly proving Winkler’s argument, a German journalist wrote:
As Angela Merkel, with admirable statesmanship, demonstrated humaneness and empathy and invited the masses of migrants stuck in the Balkans to come to Germany, the country that invented genocide showed itself to be friendly and open. Yes, the chancellor invited the people. She did so to prevent a looming humanitarian crisis. That is how wonderful Germany can be.¹²

Nonetheless, there is good reason to find Winkler’s warning about a new German Sonderweg — a German “special path” — narrow-minded and obstinate. It is perhaps precisely the opposite of the Federal Republic’s historically based understanding of itself as a practitioner of “soft power.” But Merkel’s declaration “Wir schaffen das!” — or “Yes we can!” — is clearly rooted in the generationally based narrative of a successfully managed breakthrough to unity and freedom in 1989. Powerfully inclusive on the one hand, hopelessly out of touch with reality on the other, Merkel’s declaration captures the Janus-like character of the break of 1990, the historical status of a historical triumph of good over evil that has become doubtful in retrospect.

Today, the contemporary history of Germany is increasingly understood to be less a sequel to the era of dictatorship than a prehistory of the constellation of present-day problems, as Hans Günter Hockerts and others have recently argued.¹³ Historians of the recent past thus cannot avoid putting the upheaval of 1989-1990 in relation to the continuities that lay behind it, and we must take into account continuities along with the ruptures that came with the upheaval of 1989/1990. The continuing wave of migration to Germany unavoidably creates new historical points of reference for examining present-day issues. When, for example, colleagues at the Zentrum für Zeitgeschichte are planning a conference on migration in contemporary history these days, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the completion of German national unity does not play an important role. A much more interesting topic in this context would be the odd joint effort of the Federal Republic and the GDR during the refugee crisis of 1985/1986. Do we still remember that back then the West German government supplicated the SED to be a good neighbor when about 20,000 refugees from Sri Lanka came to West-Berlin via East Berlin’s Schönefeld airport? Do we still remember how desperately politicians from the SPD and the CDU urged the Politburo to seal up the hole in the Berlin Wall at the Friedrichstraße station? And doesn’t it ring a bell

that just a few years before the Wall came down, the West German public already feared that a flood of asylum-seekers would pour into the Federal Republic from West Berlin, and that there were the same loud calls for abolition of the right to asylum in the Federal Republic as we hear today?\footnote{14}

III. The Forgotten Break in Germans’ Use and Understanding of History

The debate on the extent and character of the caesura of 1990 will thus continue. In any event, it is doubtful that the field of contemporary history will settle the matter. We have to take into account that in the German use and understanding of history — or what Germans refer to as Geschichtskultur — the date “1990” stands for a decisive rupture. Not only are the facts changing in retrospect, but so too is the way we view them. Herein lies the greatest problem in trying to find a valid way to categorize 1990 and to integrate it within a broader understanding of the recent past. We do not think history as we did in 1990. The standards for looking back on the past in Germany have shifted dramatically, almost without anyone having noticed. Coming to terms with the past — Vergangenheitsbewältigung — has been transformed into assessing the past — Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung — and the project of explaining the past rationally has given way to an almost religious worship of the past, and that in turn has influenced our historical judgment of 1990.

The inflated talk after 1989 about redemptive memory,\footnote{15} the idea that memorials recalling the dictatorial past are spaces of inner reform or even catharsis and destinations for “pilgrimages,” as well as ideas and phrases such as “historical mourning” or “historical reconciliation” point to a clear change in contemporary thinking about the cultural role of history in Germany and Europe. The idea of reasoned explanation is increasingly being mixed up with an impulse to treat the past as sacred.\footnote{16} This is evident, first, in the pseudo-religious significance we attach to the objects and witnesses through which we enter into a relationship with the

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past. The aura of historical authenticity has taken the place of divine authority, whether in the physical remnants of Germany’s dictatorships or in survivors’ testimonies. The “yearning for the original” manifests itself in the demand for films, both documentary and fictional, about the Nazi era and the GDR as well as in the many forms of historical reenactment and “living history.” It is similarly evident in the interest for “authentic objects” in museums, (private) collections, and archives or in “authentic sites”: the buildings, cityscapes, or memorials in which history appears to have taken material form. The magic power of the original remnant is evident in the fate of the Berlin Wall. In the winter of 1989/1990, it was rapidly disposed of with the aid of the countless citizens who hammered away at it, driven by the desire for souvenirs. Here is a clear example of the conversion of historical relics into hieratic relics, a hallmark of today’s cult of the original.

The power of this religious engagement with the past is manifested not only in sacred objects, but also in sacred spaces. This is evident in the move of memorial sites “from the periphery to the center” of Germany’s engagement with history since three major sites of Nazi terror in eastern Germany — the Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps — were declared national memorials by the Federal Republic in the wake of unification. Professional tour guides at such sites report how visitors always hope “to see what things were really like in those days.” The elevation of memorials to “holy sites” has been accompanied by “dark tourism” pilgrimages. Berlin’s “Historic Mile” appears to have as strong an appeal in this respect as the Obersalzberg, the former inner-German border or Peenemünde.

Beyond sacred objects and holy sites, contemporary German engagement with history converges with the sphere of religion in a third way. It also offers a promise of healing. The effort to address the legacy of dictatorship focuses on the question of “how pacification and reconciliation can be achieved within societies or between different states.” One important function of exhibitions about and memorial sites recalling East Germany’s communist dictatorship nowadays is to do justice to the victims of political persecution and to give their lives meaning by acknowledging their suffering. The demand that former Red Army and Stasi detention prisons be
Our contemporary culture of remembrance offers a healing message not only for victims of past injustices, however. The offer is open to all willing to receive it. The hope for the most immediate experience of the past possible gives expression to the wish to make yesterday available for today, to prevent it from being lost to the past and to preserve it unfaded and imperishable. This desire is expressed in the very German concept of Aufarbeitung, which could be literally translated as “processing.” Semantically, it calls to mind the Freudian concept of “working through” a past traumatic experience to break free of it. But in current German usage, Aufarbeitung has precisely the opposite meaning. It is equated with the “duty of remembrance,” as the Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in East Germany, the official body responsible for the Aufarbeitung of GDR history, defines its mission, for example. The promotion of an emotionally charged remembrance as a key element of German social self-understanding encroaches upon the régimes d’historicité, as analyzed by François Hartog, or, in other words, on the organization of the relationships between past, present, and future. The ascent of remembrance reflects the change of places between the future and the past that occurred in the final third of the twentieth century. Today, the historical look backwards is as much a comforting anchor of identity and point of orientation as the faith in a better future once was.

Given this situation, historians might still have good reason to doubt the epochal character of the break of 1990. But that will by no means diminish the attraction of 1990 in public historical consciousness. Fragments of the Wall were among Berlin’s most successful exports, and, conversely, the massive flow of history tourists to Berlin has contributed significantly to the upturn in the city’s economy in recent years. For the foreseeable future, 1990 will mark the historical point where the postwar era’s faith in progress finally gave way to our contemporary culture of remembrance, and this turning point will remain culturally significant for decades to come — as far as we can foresee today.

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