

The third of October—ten years since the reunification of Germany

Peter Schwarz
4 October 2000

The following article features as the editorial of the new edition of the magazine Gleichheit, the German-language publication of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party—PSG).

Every year on July 14 France celebrates the storming of the Bastille two centuries ago with a huge parade on the Champs Elysées. On the Fourth of July the United States celebrates the Declaration of Independence, the first formulation of human rights, which is even older than the storming of the Bastille. Even Switzerland sets off bonfires to commemorate the legendary *Rütli*schwur on the first of August. Germany, on the other hand, has always had problems with its day of national celebrations.

For the last 10 years the third of October, the day of German reunification, has filled the gap. It would have been possible to pick November 9—the day the Berlin wall came down. But that particular day already has its own significance in German history. On that date in 1938 the Nazis organised the systematic burning down of Jewish synagogues (Reichskristallnacht); on November 9, 1923 Hitler undertook his first attempted putsch in Munich; and on the same day in 1918 the Kaiser abdicated, Scheidemann proclaimed the new Republic and revolution broke out in Berlin.

Another factor in the choice of date is the fact that the fall of the wall was precipitated by the intervention of masses of people—even though in a confused form. Much better therefore to simply choose an official ceremony as remembrance of the state and legal completion of reunification. After all, there should not be any doubts raised that history in Germany is exclusively made by legitimate representatives in accordance with legal requirements.

Correspondingly the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of reunification took place in front of an invitation-only audience. The whole thing ended with general bickering between the parties, quarrelling over who deserved the credit for reunification. Because of his involvement in a finance controversy, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl could not speak at the official celebrations in Dresden. Instead he used

a CDU (Christian Democratic Union) meeting to accuse the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Greens of “betrayal of the constitutional aim of reunification”. With relish he quoted from the speeches of former SPD politicians from the middle of 1989 who regarded a unification of the two German states at that time as out of the question. For their part the SPD accused Kohl of “falsifying history”.

On the whole the general public are as little impressed with the party bickering as they are by the celebrations themselves. They have other worries. The last 10 years are not a source of pleasurable memories for those in the east or west. With 20 percent unemployment and widespread poverty the reunification is regarded sceptically by those in the east; and in the west many regard the assimilation of the GDR (German Democratic Republic—the former East Germany) as merely a lever for the introduction of social dumping and the destruction of social gains.

The real celebrating and popping of champagne corks is confined to those in business circles who were able to make a fortune from the reunification boom and the soaring of the stock markets; as well as those politicians for whom the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has, in the words of one conservative historian, been catapulted “overnight, as it were, into the role of a Continental great power with world political status”.

In this way the reunification celebrations have become a mixture of self-adulation and provincial farce which unexpectedly serve as a symbol demonstrating the remoteness of the political establishment from the broad masses.

The fact that Germany has never been able to establish a national day of celebrations based on popular consent has historical roots. All of the decisive turning points of German history were characterised by violent and usually bloody conflicts between the classes. There never was a great act of revolutionary liberation which could be communally remembered from a safe temporal distance.

The attempt in 1848 to establish a bourgeois republic by revolutionary means failed miserably because of the half-

heartedness of the revolutionary leaders and resistance in the form of Prussian bayonets. It is also problematic to recall Bismarck's "sword and iron" unification of the Reich in 1871 because of the huge burden this posed for Germany's western neighbours as well as domestic divisions unleashed by the unification. The founding of the Weimar Republic in November 1918 must also be excluded as a possible candidate—rather than being the result of a successful bourgeois revolution, the Republic came into being through the bloody suppression of a proletarian revolution.

After 1945, May 8, the date of the Nazi capitulation, had potential as a national day of celebration. But there were too many in Germany who regarded this date as one of shame, not one of liberation, and in the period of the cold war the political establishment was dependent upon such people. Left really with no other option the bourgeoisie then decided to celebrate June 17, the day in 1953 when the workers in Berlin rose up against the East German Stalinist bureaucracy. The protests directed against the SED government, sparked off by an intensification of work norms, was subsequently revised into an uprising against communism as such.

After reunification in 1989, however, such celebrations were rapidly dropped because it was necessary for the government to work together with the so-called East German "block parties"—right-wing organisations which all supported the hated SED (United Socialist Party of Germany) government in 1953.

So finally the third of October was adopted as a national holiday. But, from the very start, any idea that the reunification could be so interpreted as to play the role of a national myth enjoying broad consent proved illusory. From an historical standpoint the era of the nation state as an instrument for progress has long since passed. World economy dominates every aspect of national economic life. International politics determines national politics—including domestic and social policies. This reality cannot be ignored by simply recalling the nation. In the epoch of globalisation the conjuring up of national values inevitably assumes reactionary, chauvinistic or xenophobic forms.

The fact that the third of October has met with so little response amongst the public says more about reunification than all of the official speeches combined. Reunification overcame the borders between the two German states only to establish much deeper social divisions. While the official speakers celebrate the entry of the GDR into the constitutional set-up of West Germany as the crowning point in a 40-year period of stability and peace, reality demonstrates that in fact this period is at an end. It points not only to the end of the GDR, but also the post-war FRG based on politics of social equilibrium. From the standpoint of

history the post-war FRG will be regarded as a brief breathing space between two periods of huge domestic and external shocks.

The extent to which the political system of West Germany has been undermined is evident from the profound crises in the country's two main political parties.

The conflict surrounding Helmut Kohl, which has split the CDU, is more than just a finance scandal. The CDU is divided because its base is breaking up. In the epoch of globalisation the interests of the party's traditional clientele—the middle class—are no longer compatible with those taking their cue from the world of high finance and business. A wing of the CDU—and its state party in Bavaria the CSU (Christian Social Union) led by Edmund Stoiber, Roland Koch and Frederick Merz—are attempting to get round this problem by turning to right-wing populism. They seek to retain a hold on the voters and head off expressions of discontent. The other wing—led by CDU head Angela Merkel—attempts to compensate for the party's growing estrangement from the electorate by a closer collaboration between the parties and various groups, in the process coming closer to the Schröder government.

At first glance it appears as if the SPD is the more stable of the two parties, but in fact this just reflects the weakness of the CDU. For four decades in the post-war period the SPD had just three party chairmen: Kurt Shumacher, Erich Ollenhauer and Willy Brandt. Since reunification the party has had no less than five chairmen: Hans Jochen Vogel, Björn Engholm, Johannes Rau, Oskar Lafontaine and finally Gerhard Schröder. In this period the party has travelled so far to the right that it has largely lost contact with its traditional base. This was clearly shown by the disastrous defeats suffered by the party last summer in local and state elections. Ten years since reunification the SPD has just over 23,000 members in all of eastern Germany, less than the membership of a local organisation in one of the towns of the Ruhr area in the west.

Up until now the rejection of the old parties has mainly taken passive forms. The outcome of ensuing instability will depend on the construction of an alternative which unites working people on the basis of an international, socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact