

Twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall

The Christian Democrats celebrate Kohl, Bush and Gorbachev

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At the end of October, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) organized a ceremony in Berlin's Friedrichstadtpalast to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. An audience of 1,800, including Chancellor Angela Merkel and numerous prominent politicians, paid tribute to the three main political actors of German reunification: General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, US President George H.W. Bush and Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The main speech was delivered by German President Horst Köhler.

This celebration is characteristic of an array of meetings and publications marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. They glorify the "courageous women and men" of the "peaceful revolution" and celebrate the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a "victory for freedom," as Bernhard Vogel, chair of the KAS, put it in his introductory remarks. But they provide no critical or even thoughtful balance sheet of the events of 1989.

The devastating social consequences of the introduction of the free-market economy into the GDR are simply ignored, just like the effects of the international financial and economic crisis, which has hit the former East Germany and Eastern Europe particularly hard. So too, the wars that have raged for years in Iraq, Afghanistan and other regions of the world are excluded, for they would contradict the propaganda that, with 1989, a "new, better world order with freedom and progress for all" has been realised, as Köhler stated.

The appearance of the 85-year-old Bush Sr., the 79-year-old Kohl and 78-year-old Gorbachev in the Friedrichstadtpalast proved rather pathetic; standing in glaring contrast to the pomp with which the meeting had been announced.

That age demands its tribute is not something of which they could be accused. Helmut Kohl is hardly seen in public any more following an accident 18 months ago, and is now visibly marked by illness. He appeared in a wheelchair and had obvious difficulties articulating his words. Moreover, none of them had anything significant to say about the events in which they had been deeply involved.

Bush limited himself to a few banalities. The fall of the Berlin

Wall and the reunification of Germany had put an end to the Cold War and the legacy of two world wars, he said. He voiced his hope that "the US, Germany and Russia could continue to find ways to work for a peaceful and just world."

Gorbachev made a confused and disjointed contribution in which he emphasized, among other things, the significance of German military cemeteries in Russia. He declared that being a good actor was the most important quality for a president, and insisted that a form of perestroika is needed in the United States.

Kohl expressed his pride in German unification and stressed his close and excellent cooperation with Bush and Gorbachev in the years of change.

President Köhler began his laudatory speech in the manner of a Cold War oration. He declared the US to be the "beacon of freedom," and "Marxism-Leninism" the source of all "misfortune." He praised the "vocation of the Germans for freedom," which had been expressed in the East in the "1953 popular rebellion" as well as in the "million-fold flight" from the GDR. In the West, this vocation took the form of the "building of a stable, successful democracy."

He praised Bush, Gorbachev and Kohl as "great men" who had made history. Freedom-loving peoples determined their own history, he said, but needed "political leaders, able to act."

"The people need statesmen and women with a good grasp of the historical situation and with a sense for the right moment to act," said Köhler. In addition to the three luminaries on the platform, he cited as examples Willy Brandt, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa and François Mitterrand.

Then Köhler changed the topic and dedicated the second part of his speech to his desire for a strong and great Europe. He exhorted the assembled politicians to strive for more independence in relation to the US. "We must relieve the Americans all the more of the burden of ensuring the freedom of Europe," he demanded, with a thinly veiled swipe at the transatlantic allies. For this reason, the "European Union needs a foreign and security policy that shows strength and unanimity and which makes the EU an equal partner for all." Europe, he

said, must become “a vigorous and lasting force for good” and enjoy “worldwide respect and influence, and be an important pillar of the new international order.”

In the end, the meeting held by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation contributed nothing to an understanding of the events of 20 years ago. It was pure propaganda, combining withered anti-communist clichés with the long-held desire that Europe, under German leadership, might finally play the role of a great power and operate “on a par” with the US.

Any serious historical investigation would reveal a completely different picture of the events of 20 years ago than the one presented at the Friedrichstadtpalast. One example is the book “Deutschland einig Vaterland” (“Germany one fatherland”) by history professor Andreas Rödder, which from a distance of 20 years presents a scientific overview of German reunification in 1989/90. As far as can be inferred from his book, Rödder stands politically in the conservative camp and is an admirer of Helmut Kohl. Nevertheless, his well-researched study disproves the official myths of the “peaceful revolution.”

The mass movement that developed in 1989 in the GDR was not dominated by great revolutionary ideals of freedom. Politically, it was multilayered and confused. Indignation and rage with the ruling caste were mixed with feelings of hopelessness. This movement began in mass flight to the West and only turned against the regime when, to a large extent, it had already given up. Its public figures did not see beyond the next day. Rarely before in history has there been a movement with so little consciousness of its goals and that was so easily manipulated as the mass protests that heralded the end of the GDR in 1989.

Rödder draws a devastating picture of Gorbachev. In 1985, he initiated the developments that finally led to the fall of the GDR, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. Rödder attests to his “naïveté,” which was paired with “repression.” “To all appearances, Gorbachev did not infer anything from the developments that his own policies set in motion.” Gorbachev made “fundamental decisions in a more or less completely *ad hoc*” manner.

Rödder returns again and again to Gorbachev’s “volatile nature.” He describes the astonishment in Washington and Bonn when they found that Gorbachev had met all their demands. Rödder even asks the question: “Did Gorbachev sell off the GDR and German unification to West Germany?” He does not answer this with a yes, but names the purchase price calculated by the West German Department of Finance: DM83.55 billion in various aid packages and transfer payments, plus DM55 billion in export promotion. Compared with the latest “bank rescue packages,” that is a real bargain.

West Germany was able to achieve far more than Helmut Kohl had dared hope, according to Rödder’s balance sheet: “The unification of Germany on the basis of the West’s maximum conditions, including all-German membership in NATO, something that had never been envisaged in any

reunification scenario since Germany was divided.” German unification was also a “triumph of American policy.” “The big loser in the entire process—based on Gorbachev’s reform goals just like its interests as a great power—was the Soviet Union.”

The world events of the past 20 years cannot be seen separately from the results of German unification: The emergence of a destructive, mafia capitalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; the hubris of the bourgeoisie in the West, without which the enrichment and orgy of speculation of the past years would not have been conceivable; and finally, the neo-colonial wars of the US and NATO in Iraq, in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Rödder does not investigate the question, what social interests and forces Gorbachev represented, merely presenting the empirical results of his actions. But this still confirms the fact that, in the final analysis, the dissolution of the GDR and the Soviet Union was the initiative of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow and in East Berlin, which looked for a new basis for their privileges in capitalist property relations.

This conclusion was already drawn by the Fourth International during the events of that time. In a statement about the end of the GDR, its German section wrote on October 21, 1990:

“In the GDR, it is not socialism that has failed but its worst enemy, Stalinism. The collapse of the GDR provides a devastating verdict on Stalinism: For 40 years, the SED [Socialist Union Party] enjoyed practically unrestricted power. But it did not use this to develop socialism, but to defend its privileges and suppress and disenfranchise the working class. When it could no longer withstand the resistance to its rule, it handed back to the capitalist corporations and banks everything that two generations of workers had developed at the cost of immeasurable sacrifice.”



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