

The World According to Germany: Reassessing 1989

Given the state of the world today, political scientist Francis Fukuyama's thoughtful piece on the "End of History" is regularly ridiculed whenever discussed. Published first as an essay in the summer of 1989, then as an expanded book in 1992, it is far more nuanced than its admirers realized in the '90s, or its detractors want to admit today. Its catchy title nowadays serves as proof of the supposed naiveté of post-1989 optimism. What a difference a generation makes.

Hardly anywhere in the world was the simplistic reading of Fukuyama's essay more popular than in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Today, as we are moving ever further toward an international system characterized—again—by asymmetries of power, narrowly defined national interests and democracies under pressure, it is worth tracing back how powerfully the experience of 1989 has shaped Germany's perception of the world—and why Germany is more fundamentally challenged than others by the recent turn in international affairs.

"1989 and All That"

The sudden upheaval that led to the end of Soviet rule over Germany's and Europe's East took the world by surprise: From the strength of Poland's worker's union movement "Solidarnosc," or "Solidarity," bolstered by the Polish pope, to Hungary's courage in cutting the barbed wire along the border, to the stubborn determination of demonstrators marching in the streets in Leipzig and across

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East Germany that turned the 40th anniversary celebration of the German Democratic Republic into its last gasp. The speed by which these events transformed not just the country or the continent but indeed the global balance of power, culminating in the end of the Soviet Union barely two years later, also came as a surprise.

Fukuyama's original essay was titled with a question mark, which was dropped in the book version three years later. Most Germans welcomed this more definitive and affirmative tone. Toward the end of a century marked by having been on the wrong side of history twice, Germany finally found itself on the right side. What had looked impossible, even unthinkable, for decades suddenly seemed to be not just real, but indeed inevitable. The rapid transformation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into parliamentary democracies and market economies was taken as empirical proof of Fukuyama's bold headline.

Even better from a German point of view: personal agency or even charisma in politics were no longer decisive. History was bending toward liberal democracy. For a country so badly burnt by a catastrophic "Führer" that the word "leadership" could no longer be innocently translated into the German language, it was deeply reassuring that greater but abstract forces of history would take care of its general direction. Individuals would only matter at the margins—their task was limited to administering the advent of the inevitable.

Best of all, while Germany would still have to transform its new regions in the East, the former GDR, the country in a broader sense had already arrived at its historical destination: it was a stable parliamentary democracy with its own well-tested and respected social market economy. While many other countries around the globe would have to transform, Germany could remain as is, waiting for the others to gradually adhere to its model. It was just a matter of time.

This narrative led to two fundamental political assumptions that were widely shared, implicitly or explicitly, across most of the German political elite and the wider public. First, German policymakers put stake in the idea of convergence, in which countries around the globe would gradually transform into open-market, liberal democracies. The unification of Germany and the more gradual unification of the European continent were seen as a template of the future for all other regions of the world. It defined the prism through which Germans watched, analyzed and interpreted global events. Central Europe was successfully integrated into the economic and political fabric of the European Union as well as NATO and embarked on a "catch-up" transformation in Western Europe's image. Russia had its own history and traditions, but gradually its reforms would take hold and with a determined program of modernization it would gradually converge—politically, economically, even culturally. Even the adverse effects of chaotic privatization or by Russia's financial crisis of 1998 could not shake this belief. German policymakers, as so many others in the West, widely believed that

China would only be able to continue its miraculous economic rise if it introduced individual liberties. Only a free and open society could unleash the creativity that was at the core of economic innovation and success in the information age. An expectation of gradual convergence was also the prism through which most Germans analyzed the Arab Spring when it erupted in 2011. We were so certain of our assumptions—supposedly empirically proven—that we failed to distinguish between the normative dimensions of political statements (“Assad has lost all legitimacy”) and its analytical value. Since there was no room for authoritarianism in our imagination of the imminent end of history, these could only be last gasps and aberrations, little more.

The second assumption was perfectly captured by a line then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl often used after unification was achieved: “For the first time Germany is surrounded only by friends and partners.”¹

While seemingly benign and perhaps even obvious after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this perception changed the way Germans looked at the world. The divided country had been one of the globe’s most heavily militarized territories during the Cold War. The Iron Curtain barely kept the two vast, opposing military alliances at minimum distance from each other. During the days of the antinuclear movement a decade earlier, many saw the world as too dangerous to bear children.² Now, with foreign troops withdrawing and history coming “our way,” Germany was poised to reap a peace dividend and the country lost any perception of threat. The defense budget shrunk to barely above one percent of GDP; conscription was even suspended without any serious debate as recently as 2011 by a conservative defense minister.

In short, because of its historical luck of reunification and the end of the division of Europe, Germany had for a generation lost almost any sense that there could be threats emerging not only elsewhere in the world but even against Germany itself. The strong pacifist streak produced by two catastrophic wars that set Germany’s security and defense debates apart from neighbors such as France or Poland did not lose its relevance. To the contrary, it was further reinforced by the dominant interpretation of 1989: We were clearly ahead of others. They would have to follow our example. The future was in development aid, in conflict mediation, and in speeding up gradual convergence. Military power no longer mattered—civilian power did.³ The trading state was not a historical exception or merely a reflection of the limitations of postwar Germany; it was the future.⁴ The catastrophic failure of the United States’ invasion of Iraq was taken as another confirmation.

Two fundamental political assumptions have been widely shared in Germany since 1989.

“Never Alone”

If “Never Again” was the first fundamental lesson drawn from the collapse of civilization during the Nazi years that was meant to address the challenge of Germany’s history, “Never Alone” was clearly the second most important and deeply ingrained imperative. Multilateralism was at the heart of German foreign policy as it emerged after the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949—it was designed to solve the second part of the “German question,” the challenge of geography that put, at the center of the continent, a country that was “too big for Europe, too small for the world.”⁵ If anything, this conviction was further reinforced by the German reading of how unification after 1989 finally came about.

Firmly anchored in NATO, shielded by the U.S. nuclear umbrella and defended by tripwire forces of allies in West Berlin and along the Iron Curtain, alliance solidarity and cohesion were paramount for a country not able to defend itself on its own against a massive Soviet military on its borders. Integration within the European Communities provided the framework not just for rapid economic growth and the “Wirtschaftswunder,” or economic miracle, of the 1950s and 1960s but also paved Germany’s way back into the community of nations. It offered a path to reconciliation with countries that had been devastated by German military assault and occupation only a decade earlier.

Today, most German observers view the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the formal agreement between the West and the Soviet bloc to respect the inviolability of borders but also recognize human rights as fundamental for both sides, as a critically important milestone on the path to reunification and the end of the Cold War. It was the product of the original thinking of “Ostpolitik”—to recognize the reality of division in order to be able to change and eventually overcome it. It was also credited with empowering civil society actors—“dissidents”—across the Soviet-dominated space of Central Europe who in turn helped to expose the hollowness of socialism and to bring about revolutionary change in 1989. Thus, Helsinki and the dynamics it unleashed helped bring down the Soviet empire by the skill of diplomacy and the courage of civil society activists. In most German analysis, President Ronald Reagan’s refusal to accept the stalemate of “mutually assured destruction” is rather grudgingly acknowledged as possibly having had an effect as well. But the events of 1989 did little to strengthen public belief in the usefulness of deterrence and defense. They rather reinforced the belief in the imperative and indeed inevitability of further integration.

Having been burnt by the use of raw power, Germany longed instead for a world that would move on from what Australian thinker Hedley Bull famously called “the anarchical society” of international relations.⁶ Instead, the community of nations should be governed as much by rules and international law as possible.

From the community of law enshrined in the European Union and the Council of Europe to its support for the United Nations or innumerable trade agreements and international conventions, Germany pushed for codification of rules and for multi-lateral solutions. Militarily weak, instinctively pacifist after two world wars, Germany was more dependent and invested in a rules-based international order where its soft power carried substantial weight. Perhaps the most striking example of the ambition and optimism that the world would indeed move toward a “Weltinnenpolitik”—an international system with highly constrained exercise of the use of force and a legitimate authority to arbitrate—was the establishment of the International Criminal Court 20 years ago. Looking back, even more than 1989, 1998 may mark the furthest advance of international law and the low-water mark for the arrogance of power in the international system. The assumption was that the trend would continue: transnational challenges such as climate change so obviously required transnational solutions that an ever more integrated policy approach seemed almost inevitable. Almost.

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When talking about Europe in the early 1990’s, it was commonplace across the political and bureaucratic spectrum to use the phrase “the irreversible process of European integration”—again confounding normative preferences and analytical truth. There simply seemed to be no difference between the two in those halcyon days. Europe was the global avant-garde—and Germany, having thoroughly digested its historical and geographical lessons—thought of itself as the avant-garde within the European Union. The Economic and Monetary Union of the EU and the introduction of the Euro were only logical if you believed in this linear reading of the future.

Germany continued to adapt and modernize. Becoming a more open and diverse society seemed in perfect lockstep with history. This march of history was about more than just German reintegration after 1945—it was about the emergence of a truly globalized society.

The Turning Point

By the summer of 2011, Bashir al-Assad’s continued leadership of the Syrian regime despite all normative demands and analytical convictions was an irritant to the assumption of convergence, just as Russia’s increasingly repressive domestic politics was after Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012. But it took the sudden annexation of Crimea and Russia’s military intervention in Eastern Ukraine in

2014 to shake Germany's dominant worldview to its foundation. Russian analysts to this day still underestimate the degree to which Germany's forceful reaction, including spearheading EU sanctions, was the result of genuine shock on the German side and not just "instructions" from the United States, as Russian propaganda portrayed.⁷

The 2014 invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine shook Germany's worldview to its foundation.

Russia had shattered the idea of a European security architecture enshrined in the Charter of Paris of 1990, the most obvious proof yet that things had not irreversibly gone in the right direction, not even on the European continent. Even worse, Russia now explicitly defined its future no longer in terms of cooperation with the West but in open opposition to it.

By 2015, Germany surprised itself as much as others in its welcoming, even cosmopolitan, reaction to the refugee crisis unleashed by the Syrian civil war. Whatever the merits of the

initial reaction, Germany's response not only encountered stiff rejection in parts of Central Europe but also contributed to a renewed polarization of German society and politics unseen since the days of the Cold War. Center-left social democrats are losing public support just as center-right conservatives are. The political fringes grow stronger. The radical, right-wing AfD (Alternative for Germany) is for the first time represented in the federal and all 16 regional parliaments.

Circumstances also did not quite live up to earlier hopes in neighboring countries. Central Europe experienced a backlash against the "catch-up" policies of post-1989 euphoria. Politics in the region insisted on the long-overlooked fact that national consciousness—if not nationalism—had been a critical factor alongside liberal reformism in their peaceful revolutions of 1989. They no longer looked at Western Europe as their own future, defying ever more openly Germany's assumption of convergence.⁸

Further from the European continent, although China would emerge in 2017 as Germany's largest trading partner worldwide, at the same time it unmistakably was moving away from Western standards, defying all assumptions of further opening and liberalization. China's refusal to accept legal arbitration on the South China Sea dispute and its increasingly repressive approach to Western NGOs were no longer compatible with a gradually converging worldview, but instead resulted in "shrinking spaces" both for high-level political consensus and for civil society cooperation. President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power by successive party congresses, including removing term limits from China's constitution in March 2018, left little doubt that China had interpreted history differently and chosen a different path.

Taken together, these developments near and far, from the illiberal turn in Central Europe, the civil wars of the Middle East, and the authoritarian turn in Russia to China's power projection, produced a great disillusionment. The assumption of gradual convergence as it had dominated the analysis of international politics in Germany after 1989—an assumption that had even survived the global financial crisis of 2008 (which in retrospect is still hugely underestimated in its catastrophic effects on the West's global credibility)—was now in clear contradiction to the world emerging before our eyes.

But these challenges from abroad paled in comparison to the second and even more fundamental shock that came from within the heart of the West to which Germany had tied its future since the 1950s. In 2016, a majority of the British electorate voted for “Brexit” in their June referendum, against all economic and political rationality—or so it seemed to Berlin. The irreversible nature of European integration was no more.

A few months later, Donald Trump was elected U.S. president. What are Germans to make of a world in which the U.S. National Security Strategy goes to great lengths to describe a new era of “great power rivalry,” while the president openly questions the decade-old security guarantee enshrined in NATO? The days of the peace dividend are clearly over. A threat perception close to zero no longer looks like the future, but as dangerously out of touch with the world around us.

The shockwaves have not yet subsided. Instead they keep coming and growing. First, if it can happen in the United Kingdom and the United States, two of the most established and resilient democracies in the world, such upheaval and breakdown of reason and common sense could happen anywhere. Democracy itself is now at stake.

Second, a U.S. administration announcing and repeating that “the world is not a “global community” but an arena where nations, non-governmental actors, and businesses engage and compete for advantage”⁹ puts the “never alone” mantra of German foreign policy fundamentally into question. While others can go back to their respective Gaullist traditions of foreign policy thinking, with a more or less clear set of defined national interests that do not depend on integration with others, there is little of that in Germany that has not been contaminated by the ideological perversion of the Nazi era. Multilateralism is all there is in the German mainstream today. The Trump challenge goes much deeper than just policy disagreements—his approach pulls the rug from under the feet of German foreign policy thinking since the foundation of modern Germany in the late 1940s, a rug woven by far-sighted American policy after the war.

Multilateralism is all there is in the German mainstream today; Germany has lost its moorings.

Third, the return of the strongmen—from Vladimir Putin to Xi Jinping, Tayyip Erdogan and Donald Trump—runs counter to the reassuring assumption that structural change is more powerful than personal agency. The leadership style of the past decade—one that so perfectly fit the German preference of professionally and skillfully administering the inevitable during a decade of economic globalization—suddenly and unexpectedly looks out of sync with the times.

Little wonder then that German public opinion polls offer a paradox these days: a very high level of personal well-being, coupled with a strong sense of uncertainty about the future and a fear that this well-being cannot possibly last. The rise of political polarization in Germany is palpable. The centrist moment of German politics is coming to an end. Its waning has been reinforced and accelerated by the influx of a million refugees over a short period in 2015 and 2016, but is clearly also driven by other factors that reflect wider tendencies: a growing desire for simple choices and clear-cut categories in the face of growing complexity, the unease about rising inequalities within modern societies, and the poisonous effect of social media on political discourse.

With these developments challenging both the international system and the internal cohesion and consensus of Western societies, the world no longer conforms to German expectations. Germany has “lost its moorings.”

The Road Ahead

From the life-changing experience of an entirely unexpected, nonlinear event such as the “*annus mirabilis*” 1989, many Germans derived a thoroughly linear expectation of the future. There is something deeply ironic—and very human—in this expectation. But it is now being shattered. Coming to terms with this particular German version of the return of history and geography will be the country’s crucial challenge in setting realistic foreign policy priorities for the future.

A wide-ranging debate on the future course of German foreign policy is only just beginning. Should Germany continue to push for the spread of liberal democracy and for a rules-based world order—without or possibly even against a United States that is turning away from its own ideals formed in the 1940s and 1950s? Or is the gravest risk for Germany to remain the guardian of a status quo that has ceased to exist? Should Germany adapt to the politics of retreat and resentment, and stop underwriting the European regional order just as President Trump’s United States is no longer willing or interested in underwriting the international liberal order it created decades ago? Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder hinted at such a change in public remarks made in June 2018: “the days of an orderly multilateralism are somewhat over (. . .) and will be replaced by decisions taken by individual countries (. . .). Germany will be respected if we demonstrate that we are able to

take care of our own interests.”¹⁰ What would a reasonable and viable path between these two extremes be? A path that recognizes Germany’s continued dependence on the United States for its defense and security, while acknowledging the need to close the gap between rhetoric and capabilities on foreign policy?

Europe and the project of the European Union clearly emerge as the critical centerpiece of Germany’s debate. The sense of urgency about strengthening Europe in the face of increasing great power rivalry is growing. And yet, there is a tremendous gap between Germany’s self-perception as the EU’s master pupil and the perception of Germany by its partners. A Pew poll found as early as 2013, before the fissures and fractures of the refugee and migration crisis, that Germans look at themselves as the “least arrogant” and “most compassionate” of all EU member states. Italy, Spain, Greece, Poland and the Czech Republic, by contrast, named Germany when asked for the “most arrogant” and “least compassionate” country of the bloc.¹¹

Even if we take much of this as mere reflections of the tendency of human nature to exaggerate one’s own contribution, Germany’s answer to the existential question of the EU’s future cohesion and convergence will determine the fate of the European project. Will Germany be alert, open and attentive to the views, preferences and needs of its European partners—and willing to invest in a common future? It is an open and increasingly controversial question in modern-day Germany whether it can—and indeed should—muster the political will to make a difference in the future of united Europe. This is clearly where its core interests lie—it is where its own future will be decided first and foremost. This Union is where the country can reduce its obvious vulnerabilities on defense as well as on trade most easily and most convincingly. But the EU’s continued success needs a more active German role, both conceptually and materially. With its current passivity and its narrow focus on a strict fiscal rule-book, Germany risks failure. The consolidation of an increasingly fragmented continent in the face of a world that is moving back to more narrowly-defined power politics will only succeed with a strong and sustained German commitment.

Behind the immediate policy questions of EU reform and EU cohesion, however, lurks a deeper question: Is Germany capable of realizing that the post-1989 period—in which its own postwar historical lessons and its sense of historical inevitability ran together—was not the beginning of the end of history, but rather a mirage, or a brief—and unusually happy—historical moment? As early as his inaugural speech of his second term, then-Foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier asked: “In a world undergoing sweeping change, we have to ask ourselves the critical question as to whether the pillars on which these fundamental principles rest can still be relied upon to bear this weight.”¹²

Is Germany capable of realizing that the post-1989 period was a brief mirage?

Donald Trump, for all his disruption, is not the origin of this German predicament, nor will it end with him. He is the unexpected amplifier, the magnifying glass. But he only hastens the question of whether Germany is capable, now that the “German moment” in post-Cold War history is coming to an end, to take a fresh look at the world—and thereby at itself—informing its hard-won normative ideals with a greater dose of realism.¹³ It would, among other things, require a realization that Germany’s historical lessons, while supposedly universal in nature, are indeed drawn from a very exceptional history and a very exceptional transformation that does not easily lend itself to being reproduced elsewhere.

If the answer is yes—that Germany is now not only capable of adding a greater dose of realism, but would be accepted by its neighbors and the broader global community for doing so—there is no need for despair. The progress and the achievements of the last quarter century are then real. Human life is better today than at any other time in history, however imperfect the world is and always will be. The European Union is arguably still the best, if not the only, convincing answer to the country’s demons—its history and its geography. There is still plenty worth fighting for. But history will not deliver that answer inevitably for us—it is for us to win, anew.

The real lesson of 1989 was never about history’s inevitable path, but rather its opposite. The history of unification represents hope even under the most adverse circumstances. The unthinkable can happen. The future is open and its shape depends on our own actions. We should not expect the inevitability of a better future, but should never discard its possibility—including the emancipation of those who today suffer the consequences of authoritarian rule. This is a far more limited lesson than an expansive reading of Fukuyama suggested, but it is still uplifting, not at all alarmist, and gives plenty of reason for hope—a message that would serve the country well. And it conforms much better to the ideal of human freedom than the notion of a predetermined course of history.

Endnotes

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