

# The Fall of the Berlin Wall: Effects on and Impressions of the United States

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Most Americans celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall as a sign that international trends were going well for the United States and a stunning victory for democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law and the free market system. My wife and I watched wide-eyed as our small kitchen television set in Vienna, Virginia presented almost unbelievable images of the festivities in Berlin on the evening of November 9, 1989 after East German authorities had opened the border. Of course, we were not a “normal” sample. The fact that I had worked transatlantic security issues for two Cold War decades, and that my wife, as a child in Vienna, had survived allied bombing of the Austrian capital, gave us unique perspectives on what had happened.

The next day the story was front page news on American papers. The *New York Times* headline reported “East Germany Opens Frontier to the West for Emigration or Visits; Thousands Cross.” The *Times* correspondent who filed the story from Berlin, Serge Schmemmann, recalls in a new book, “...it was not only a political story. It was also an intensely human story, about people rising up to break down a wall that had kept them brutally apart—a wall that had divided Germany, and all of Europe, into a free and democratic West and an East that lived under dictatorship. It was about people choosing freedom.”

For me, the new reality hit even closer to home because I had only a few weeks before I returned from a conference in Berlin, for the first time having seen the Wall from the air as the plane circled for its landing at Tegel. Participants in the conference at the Aspen Institute surely sensed change in the air, as the democratic rumblings across Eastern Europe had already begun to shake the continent, but few if any foresaw just how deep the revolutions would run.

While in Berlin, I took the opportunity to visit an East German academic I had met in Washington. Transported in a US consular car through Checkpoint Charlie, I dutifully showed the East German border guard my passport without opening the car window—the procedure recommended by US officials in Berlin. Within weeks, such formalities would be ancient history.

Fortuitously, the West German government had earlier awarded me a visitor's grant to return to Germany and Berlin in the second half of November. Being able to experience the "before and after" in the short span of a few weeks was a priceless experience for a Washington-based analyst. With a disposable camera, I captured images of East German guards standing on the top of the wall with a haze hanging over the Brandenburg Gate in the background. Under different circumstances, the guards might have appeared threatening. In the new state of affairs, they were anything but—flirting with a group of teenage girls on the western side of the now-breached wall.

Huge questions remained about what would come next, but the atmosphere in Berlin in those days was of palpable joy, relief and celebration. I felt privileged to have seen and felt it so closely.

These events came against a backdrop in which Americans, perhaps more than anyone other than West Germans, saw the Berlin Wall as a symbol of communist danger and Western strength and resolve. American presidents had often suggested the importance of the Wall to America's objectives in the Cold War. John F. Kennedy, visiting Berlin in 1963, proclaimed "Ich bin ein Berliner." Kennedy's formulation conveyed empathy for West Berliners as well as support for the goals of a liberal democratic West Germany. It was seen as an important token of American support for the city, and enhanced West Berlin's image as a beacon for freedom and democracy.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan, also speaking at the Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate, just as famously commanded "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." In the end, neither Mr. Gorbachev nor Mr. Reagan tore down the wall. It fell of its own weight, like the communist regimes across central and eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact, and, ultimately, the Soviet Union.

In those early days of the "post Cold War world," stunned governments across Europe and the Atlantic were forced to assess the implications of what had just happened and to produce strategies for their reactions. No government had anticipated

these events, and none had contingency plans in hand. However, all interested governments had predispositions, prejudices and priorities.

The United States had long supported the West German government's approach to German reunification, even though the Soviet Union and its previously-compliant East German regime had saved the United States and other governments from being forced to face the issue squarely. The George H. W. Bush administration's reaction was at first cautious. On November 10, reports suggested the administration worried that the new circumstances might provide the Soviet Union the opportunity to entice West Germany away from its NATO moorings by offering some form of controlled unification of the two Germanies. *The Los Angeles Times* quoted a "senior Administration official" as saying "We're on the horns of a dilemma in that respect.... We can't be against reunification, if it's peaceful and within the framework of a democratic Western European community. But we can't be for reunification that goes too fast and threatened to suck West Germany out of NATO."

The Bush administration wisely responded to its "dilemma" by going on the offensive. It decided to help facilitate reunification on terms favorable to the United States and a democratic Germany. Meanwhile, the Soviet regime's position was weakening on all fronts, with its East European allies openly rejecting their Soviet-imposed systems and similar fracture lines spreading in the Soviet Union itself.

Long-standing Soviet opposition to German reunification on western terms was nonetheless joined by skepticism in some western quarters. While the United States moved strongly to support West Germany's position in reunification negotiations, some other allies did so only reluctantly. In Paris, French President Francois Mitterrand acted as if he shared novelist François Mauriac's 1958 much-cited comment that "I love Germany so much that I am thrilled that there are two of them." Mitterrand naturally reflected French concerns born of historical experience with a too-powerful Germany and the more recent close relations with a pacific and more manageably-sized West Germany. Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher shared some of Mitterrand's concerns about reunification and argued that the process should not move ahead too quickly.

The process was nonetheless unstoppable, and the United States had made the appropriate policy choices. When German reunification was agreed just a year after the Wall had fallen, the United States was on the right side of history, and the right side of Germany. The Germany that resulted did stay in the NATO alliance, and remained a friend and ally of the United States. However, seen twenty years later, there is a degree of American disappointment with the nature and policies of the united Germany that emerged from these dramatic events.

Joining in a unified Germany, the East Germans brought with them some troublesome remnants of their communist/Warsaw Pact past. The eastern half of a reunited Germany required huge injections of capital from the west to jump-start the process of economic integration. Perhaps this was the easy part. More complicated was the fact that there was no entrepreneurial spirit for which their western cousins had become known and from which they had become wealthy. Successfully transplanting this mentality onto the East German populace in place of the paternalism fostered by the East German regime could be a decades-long task. The East Germans also brought with them attitudes conditioned by four decades of propaganda against the West, NATO, and the United States.

These Germans from the east had none of the appreciation for American political, military and economic assistance to West Germany following the Second World War. After all, they were on the other side. The early stages of integration with the west were not easy, and many East Germans waxed sentimental about the less-challenging “good old days” inside the Soviet-dominated Empire.

Unfortunately, even in West Germany, the post-World War II generations were passing, and the successor generations of leaders and opinion-makers had attitudes toward the United States conditioned more by Vietnam, Euro-missile deployments, and well-engrained pacifism—the latter a product of intentional Western policies aimed at burying forever German militarism.

Since the revolutions of 1989, differences have accumulated between the United States and Germany on a variety of fronts. The German approach to its role in Afghanistan makes no sense to many Americans. Germany won't officially acknowledge that it is “at war,” while American and other allied troops, including these days some Germans soldiers, are falling victim to Taliban assaults

and Improvised Explosive Devices. Elsewhere, Germany benefits from its energy and trade relationship with Russia, while Russia falls back into old authoritarian ways.

A leading American expert on U.S.-German relations, Stephen F. Szabo, argues that "...there are real differences in interests, cultures, and approaches between Berlin and Washington, which could lead to dangerous divisions if not handled well." In a recent analysis published in the *Washington Quarterly*, Szabo suggests that, at the root of the problem is the fact that "Germans tend to believe the Cold War ended peacefully and Germany was reunified because of détente and engagement with the other side.... The lesson drawn for future policy was that dialogue, diplomacy, mutual trust, and multilateralism were the best approaches for dealing with seemingly intractable opponents." Meanwhile, many Americans tend to see "...the end of the Cold War as a vindication of the more aggressive policies of former president Ronald Reagan, such as the military buildup, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), "the evil empire" and "tear down this wall Mr. Gorbachev...."

Americans will celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall along with their German friends, but some may regret the outcome that is today's Germany. There will be no regrets concerning American facilitation of reunification. For American realists, the terms and conditions of reunification prevented Germany from drifting into the Russian sphere of influence. For American idealists, the terms and conditions honored American support for democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.

Some Americans will nonetheless wonder why this Germany that has been helped in so many ways by the American democracy over the past 60 years today stands out as one of the most severe critics of the United States. Perhaps, on the other hand, the United States helped create a new state that so honors the values we espouse that it feels an obligation to remind us when we seem to be straying from them.

In any case, the United States and Germany are destined to affect and be affected by each other's policies and actions. Germany has not disappeared into the European Union's wallpaper, but instead presents itself as a state increasingly sensitive to its own perceived national interests as well as its European and transatlantic moorings. And, the United States benefits in the

long run from a cooperative, even if mutually critical, relationship with Germany. The advent of the Obama Administration, and the president's popularity in Germany and across Europe, certainly affected the tone of the U.S.-German relationship, even if it did not fundamentally alter divergent national interests. The anniversary of the fall of the Wall should therefore be seen by Germans and Americans as cause for celebration as well as an opportunity for re-dedication to common values and accommodation of legitimate perceptions and interests on both sides of the relationship.

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