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The Merkel Effect

What Today's Germany Owes to Its Once-Communist East

By Dirk Kurbjuweit

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East Germany ceased to exist following the 1989 revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall. But did the former communist country help shape today's Germany? The answer is yes, and Chancellor Merkel is a big reason why.

The West will assimilate the East and transform the fruits of its revolution into profits for its companies. Nothing will remain of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and its citizens will have to submit to a foreign lifestyle. The East is taken over, an event the revolutionaries welcomed with open arms -- but it's a hostile takeover, an obliteration and eradication of what the eastern part of Germany once was. West Germany will simply expand, and that will be that.

Such were the expectations after the euphoria of the revolution -- the elation that prevailed when the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989 -- had dissipated. Even worse, some even feared that a newly expanded Germany would regress into a reincarnation of a former empire of evil. In February 1990, author Günter Grass said: "The gruesome and unprecedented experience of Auschwitz, which we shared with the people of Europe, speaks against a unified Germany." Grass favored a confederation, and if it did turn into a unified state, after all, "it will be doomed to fail."

But Germany did not follow this advice. Unless we are completely mistaken, the failure predicted by Grass was avoided. But what about the other suspicions, the fears of takeover and commercialization of the revolution? Were the courageous citizens of East German cities like Leipzig and Halle merely added to the army of consumers, without bringing any political change to their new country?

A revolution has two goals: to put an end to everything that preceded it and to create something new. The revolutionaries of 1989 achieved the first goal when the GDR ceased to exist as a country. But the second goal was a different matter. The Federal Republic, as West Germany was (and today's Germany is) formally known, enveloped the former East Germany, and the new entity was something familiar, at least at first. The West had expanded eastward.

But now, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is clear that this is not the whole story. The revolution also created the conditions for something new, a different Germany. The institutions haven't changed and the West German economy continues to dominate, but something has also flowed in the opposite direction. Could it be that the Federal Republic of Germany, which has been gazing westward since 1949, has become more eastern in the last few years?

Quieter in Germany

Nothing has contributed more to this change than the chancellor from the east, Angela Merkel. She is a democrat and a champion of freedom, and she hasn't created an expanded GDR. Nevertheless, there are aspects to the way she runs the country that are reminiscent of the former East Germany.

A dictatorship fears open discourse and conflict, and it thrives on the fiction of unity. The ruler or the ruling party claims that it is executing the will of the people, and because that will is supposed to be uniform, everyone is under forced consensus. Silence in the country is treated as approval. Merkel grew up in this system.

Elements of it are reflected in her political style. She despises open dispute, she does not initiate discourse and she feels comfortable when silence prevails. She prefers to govern within a grand

coalition, because it enables her to create broad consensus within small groups. Things have become quieter in Germany.

Many people in the country like that. Eastern Germans are used to it. Even in the past, the Anglo-Saxon model, with its dualisms and heated conflicts, was suspect to most West Germans. Even the French argue more heatedly than the Germans. Merkel has enabled Germans to find themselves.

Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) have been forged into a new kind of SED, a more social-democratic one, one which generously funds the social consensus, providing money for families and retirees, as well as a minimum wage. The only party that managed to show some sympathy for Anglo-Saxon capitalism, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), has all but disappeared.

While Merkel brings the East German element of silence instead of discourse into federal German politics, President Joachim Gauck, also an East German, provides an audible dissidence. As a pastor in the northeastern city of Rostock, Gauck was no resistance fighter, yet he was a civil rights activist. He injects his energetic approach to freedom into German politics, along with the message that freedom must be fought for or defended, with armed force, if necessary.

Germany's New Center

He has encountered the most resistance from a party whose roots are also in the GDR, the Left Party. For the most part, it emerged from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor party to the SED, and later joined forces with left-wing defectors from the SPD. The Left Party is so strong that a leftist majority could not be assembled without it. But so far the SPD has refused to entertain the idea of a coalition government with the Left Party at the national level. As a result, an eastern German party is responsible for the fact that an eastern German chancellor has managed to stay in power so long, at the head of a government with an eastern German imprint. It would, in short, be difficult to claim that Germany has retained the character of the old federal republic after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This diagnosis depends heavily on Merkel and could therefore be ephemeral. But the nation itself has also changed. It has discovered a new center.

Until 1945, Germans had only lived in a shared country for 74 years. Perhaps that was why it was so easy for the western part of the nation to abandon the idea of unity. Konrad Adenauer (CDU), the first West German chancellor, believed that the Western powers represented the salvation of his federal republic. He didn't take the Stalin Note seriously, which held out the prospect of German unity for the price of neutrality in the early 1950s. As a result, the eastern Germans were left high and dry.

West Germany took the westward path, and by the 1970s, most people were using the concept of "brothers and sisters" in the two Germanys in an ironic sense. A sense of foreignness did exist, but it was also manufactured. Many West Germans wanted to see themselves as Europeans first

and Germans second, primarily out of shame for the Nazi past. Many West Germans were fond of nonchalantly saying that they felt closer to a Briton or a Frenchman than to an East German.

Over the years, those on the more comfortable side of the Berlin Wall began to look askance at those on the other side. They were viewed as great athletes (who used performance-enhancing drugs, of course) who were nevertheless small-minded and smug, people who never drove faster than the speed limit on the autobahn, surrounded by informants, dressed in those oddly faded jeans, people with the misfortune to be locked up behind the death strip, and yet who were also there somewhat voluntarily. The West Germans created images of East Germans who were so foreign that it would be impossible to be reunited with them. In doing so, they overlooked the fact that varying levels of consumption and freedom have little effect on deeper-seated mentalities, and certainly cannot change everything in 40 years -- the blink of an eye, historically speaking.

'Social Monarchy'

The citizens of East Germany had not alienated themselves as strongly from their counterparts in West Germany, despite encouragement from the SED. The country bordering theirs to the west remained a place of aspirations and hopes -- for more freedom and a higher level of consumption. The step they took following their revolution was in fact not a step into a completely alien world. Despite the separation, citizens in the eastern and western parts of Germany retained a similar political mentality.

Germans value a strong social welfare state. In the GDR, it provided total care at a low level. While it isn't as comprehensive in the federal republic, it also offers a better standard of living.

Both the east and the west have a tendency toward anti-capitalism. It was an established part of the system in the GDR, while in West Germany it developed in a special form called the Rhenish model of capitalism, which was less permissive than the Anglo-Saxon model and allowed for more government influence.

The recently deceased historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler found that a desire for a "social monarchy" already existed in 19th-century Germany. Citizens pinned their hopes on a strong state and not the individual. This is the key difference between Germans, on the one hand, and the British and Americans, on the other.

Germans have a pacifist strain that developed on both sides of the border after the disaster of World War II. Especially active peace movements arose in both East and West Germany.

Despite their fascination with all things American, the Germans indulge in anti-Americanism. It was imposed by the state in the GDR, and yet citizens there knew that US missiles would destroy their country if a war erupted. In West Germany, the love-hate relationship with the American big brothers became mixed with anti-capitalist and pacifist elements.

It is interesting that these four basic positions -- the affection for the social welfare state, pacifism, anti-capitalism and anti-Americanism -- correspond to the aims of the Left Party,

making it the quintessentially German party. Still, it cannot achieve majorities nationwide because it defends its position with a radical, un-German approach.

Deeper Roots

Nevertheless, Sahra Wagenknecht, a member of the German parliament and a Left Party leader, has managed to become a media star with her radical critique of capitalism. During the financial crisis, she gained the support of people who would otherwise have had little to do with the Left Party. Wagenknecht also represents a strong eastern element in German politics.

Of course, many East Germans had initial difficulties in dealing with the free market economy. And perhaps the food in their restaurants still isn't very good, at least judging by the complaints of West Berliners returning from weekend outings to the surrounding state of Brandenburg. But that will disappear over time. Fundamentally, eastern and western Germans are not that different.

In terms of mentality and values, East Germany would have had a much more difficult time uniting with Great Britain. But the same holds true of West Germany. At the time, West Germans felt closer to the British, and yet at their core they were as German as Germans can be.

Because anti-capitalism and the love of the social welfare state have even deeper roots in the eastern German population than in western Germany, these movements have become stronger overall in united Germany. Together, all four basic positions form an image of a nation that remains romantic and wants to keep its distance from the squabbles and hardships of a cold world. Merkel is the right chancellor for the job, because of her protective instincts, and because she usually does what her country expects her to do.

In its late phase, the revolution of 1989 was also a national revolution, just like the revolution of 1848, a time when citizens also associated notions of freedom and democracy with German unity. They failed because the Prussian king was unwilling to lead a democratic Germany. The proliferation of small states known as *Kleinstaaterei* lasted for another 20 years.

The revolutionaries of 1989 achieved their goal on October 3, 1990, which has been a national holiday ever since, the Day of German Unity. After that, the question was whether the fears of intellectuals like Günter Grass would come true, fears of a return to nationalism and militarism, and of German dominance over Europe.

Devoid of Nationalism

When it comes to nationalism, one of the things the West Germans managed to learn from the East Germans was flag-waving. It was part of every parade in the GDR, whereas West Germans only waved their flags in stadiums, during international sports competitions, and did so with some degree of reticence. The 2006 soccer World Cup, on the other hand, became a festival wrapped in the colors of the German flag, black, red and gold. The Germans celebrated as Germans, but they also celebrated Togo and Brazil. The act of waving the flag was not hollow the way it was in the past, but happy. We have become a nation almost devoid of nationalism.

There are pockets, of course. And deeply sick ones at that, such as the NSU terrorist group, which murdered immigrants. This excessive xenophobia emerged from the former East Germany as did the renaissance of the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). But western Germany can't exactly claim to be overly welcoming to immigrants, either. In fact, mentalities in the east and the west were fundamentally similar on this issue.

On the issue of militarism, the peaceful 1989 revolutionaries would probably have been the last ones to predict that they would pave the way for Germany's participation in future wars. But that was exactly what happened. Once the Germans were united, their NATO allies saw them as a normal country, a nation with normal obligations. The expectations of military commitment grew and continue to grow, especially given the current state of global affairs.

The German military, the Bundeswehr, has thus far completed two major combat missions: in the Balkans and in Afghanistan. But regardless of one's stance on these missions, they have not triggered militarism or a new Prussianism. The Bundeswehr has remained a cautious army, one that lawmakers deploy in scrupulous ways.

Finally, when it comes to fears of German domination over Europe, probably the most breathtaking change has occurred in its position toward the European Union. Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl fought for the euro and a United States of Europe, and he felt that the Germans stood to benefit from every deutschmark that went to Brussels. West Germany did not see itself as a complete entity, which it wasn't, but as a part of larger entities, like Europe and NATO. It was because of this attitude that Kohl had no objection to the notion of allowing his country to dissolve into the EU.

Merkel learned policy in a united and therefore complete Germany, a large country that has become more self-confident. She pays closer attention to what is in Germany's interest, and in her view this doesn't always include solidarity with other nations, especially in financial matters.

A New Sensation

Germany dominates Europe because it is so strong economically. It is also highly self-reliant in other ways. It is no longer an obedient part of the West. When NATO launched air strikes in Libya, Merkel isolated her country from all the leading Western powers, including the United States, Great Britain and France. When Vladimir Putin took over the Kremlin, he discovered many sympathizers in Germany.

All things considered, a dialectic movement emerged from the revolution. The federal republic made Germany's eastern parts western by incorporating it, but it also became less western, perhaps even more eastern in the process -- because of its top politicians and their understanding of political culture, and because of a reinforcement of old tendencies like anti-capitalism and a love of the social welfare state.

"The Long Road West," the title of a book by historian Heinrich August Winkler, has been interrupted. In fact, we have even taken a few steps back recently. Germany is not as western European in 2014 as it was in 1989.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, because the West itself is no longer as solid an entity as it was in 1989. As long as the underpinnings -- freedom, peacefulness, democracy, the constitutional state and the social market economy -- remain untouched, Germany also has a right to its own path within its alliances, the EU and NATO.

Perhaps the 1989 revolutionaries didn't have many of these developments in mind. But they didn't just remove the GDR from maps; they also changed Germany as a whole.

Revolutions arise from obstinacy. People are dissatisfied with what they are told and they develop new ideas. That was how it was in 1989, in Leipzig and elsewhere. Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but 25 years later we are now living in an obstinate country, which is a new sensation for Germans in the postwar era.